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MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

THESIS

**PULLING THE RELIGIOUS TRIGGER: IRAN'S END-
TIMES BELIEFS AND DIVINE JUSTIFICATIONS FOR
POTENTIAL ACTION AGAINST THE UNITED STATES**

by

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September 2014

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UNITED STATES**

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ABSTRACT

The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran has significantly shaped and impacted developments in the Near and Middle East and inspired the regional rise of Shia Islam. Iran's Islamic government has consistently played a leading role in promoting anti-Western and anti-American sentiments within the global context of Islamic radicalization. It is imperative, therefore, that United States government officials more fully understand the role of religion in Iran's approach to international relations.

This thesis topic fulfills a specific and important knowledge gap in understanding Iran's religious beliefs as trigger points for strategic actions against the United States. In particular, this research examines Iran's religious tools and sacred carriers as potential triggers in the form of individual leaders, end-times beliefs, religious traditions, or divine justifications. It explores Iran's end-times beliefs, to include how the earth will be governed before the Day of Judgment, and the extent to which these millenarian beliefs might affect the regime's actions.

Using primary source documents from Iran's most influential contemporary leaders, this research project revealed three major narratives that are central to the self-preservation of the Iranian regime: 1) establishing a government representing true or pure Islam; 2) protecting the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Revolution; and 3) fighting oppression and imperialism. These narratives serve as the backdrop to understanding Iran's religious options—the sacred carriers and tools—that could play a key role in future Iranian aggression directed at the United States.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CNAS	Center for a New American Society
CE	Common Era
INSS	Institute for National Security Studies (Israel)
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
IRGC-QF	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps—Qods Force
IRIB	Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting
MOIS	Ministry of Intelligence and Security (Iran)
SNSC	Supreme National Security Council (Iran)
UNGA	United Nation’s General Assembly
WMD	weapons of mass destruction

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This thesis topic fulfills a specific and important knowledge gap in the U.S. policymaker's understanding of Iran's religious beliefs as trigger points for strategic actions against the United States. Trigger points are sacred carriers in the form of individual leaders, end-times beliefs, religious traditions, or divine justifications for starting political, military, or terrorist operations against the United States. A sacred carrier is "a means through which vitally important values are sustained and passed on in cultures and something true believers are willing to die for."¹ This thesis also examines, as a major element of Iran's religious beliefs, the country's Shia end-times doctrine on how the earth will be governed before the Day of Judgment, and the extent to which these millenarian beliefs might affect the regime's actions.

As a theocracy, which holds elections but actually functions as a dictatorship, Iran's religious hierarchy has ultimate authority over the nation-state administration. According to the Iranian constitution, the ultimate authority in Iran is a Grand Ayatollah, a Supreme Leader who also functions as a sacred carrier—one who serves as a *source of emulation* for Shia Muslims.² Iran, therefore, can and does use religion to justify strategic actions.

The purposes of this research are twofold, applied and conceptual: 1) to assist U.S. policymakers, Intelligence Community members, and homeland security practitioners in understanding Iranian sacred carriers, religious tools, and end-times justifications for political, military, and/or terrorist actions against the United States; and 2) to contribute to the research body and understanding of this issue. The research question asks: *What sacred carriers and religious tools could the Iranian regime use to mobilize or launch attacks against United States interests at home or abroad?* This exploratory study does not try to predict whether Iran would act upon its religious beliefs or the types of action it might employ. Rather, it examines the religious options—the

¹ Fathali Moghaddam, *The Psychology of Dictatorship* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2013), 92.

² Ibid., 168.

sacred carriers and tools—that could play a key role in future Iranian aggression directed at the United States.

A. BACKGROUND

Iran, formerly known as Persia, is home to almost 80 million people.³ The majority of Iranians identify with a strong sense of Persian nationalism, history, and culture. Knowing contemporary Iran, however, requires a thorough understanding of Shia Islam—particularly the Twelver branch—and the context surrounding Iranian history and current events dating back to the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The 1979 revolution in Iran marked the overthrow of the U.S.-backed monarch, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and the establishment of an Islamic government led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Twelver Shi'ism, also known as *Twelvers*, is the sect of Shia Islam practiced by Iran's Supreme Leader and the majority of Iran's Muslims.⁴ Twelvers believe in a line of 12 imams who are the divinely ordained political and religious leaders of Islam and direct descendants of the Prophet Mohammed. The twelfth imam, Mohammed al-Mahdi, went into occultation in 873 CE as a child. Twelvers believe that *the Mahdi* will return to redeem Islam by defeating its enemies and rule the world under Islamic law.⁵ In essence, the Iran's Supreme Leader considers himself a placeholder for the return of the Mahdi and, according to Ayatollah Khomeini, can exercise “the missing Imam's authority on Earth.”⁶

Since the death of Khomeini in 1989, the Islamic Republic of Iran continues as a theocracy, and is supervised by Khomeini's successor, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The Iranian constitution grants the Supreme Leader authority over all branches of the Iranian government to include the military and the state-run media. The

³ “The Iran Primer,” United States Institute of Peace, accessed July 18, 2014, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/>.

⁴ Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), xi, xiii.

⁵ Abdulaziz Abdulhussein Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism: The Idea of Mahdī in Twelver Shi'ism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1981), 1–3, 182–183.

⁶ Karim Sadjadpour, “The Supreme Leader,” *The Iran Primer*, accessed October 6, 2013, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/supreme-leader>.

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was formed after the 1979 revolution to protect the Islamic Republic and its Supreme Leader. The IRGC's top commanders report to directly to Ayatollah Khamenei.

The Supreme Leader and IRGC retain control over Iran's most lethal weapons systems as well as Iran's economic lifeline—the oil and gas industry—and they act as patron to Hezbollah, a Lebanese-based Shia terrorist organization capable of operating worldwide. The regime also supports Hamas, a militant Palestinian Sunni organization, in their resistance against Israel. Perhaps of most concern to the United States and Israel, however, is the wide held belief that Iran—through its uranium enrichment program—may be close to developing a nuclear weapon, which would significantly change the balance of power in the Middle East. Khamenei and the ruling clergy in Iran, for the most part, continue to perceive the U.S. and Israel as enemies, oppressors, and direct threats to the tenets of the Islamic Republic.

B. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Using a grounded theory approach, this research project explored and surveyed numerous primary source documents from Iran's most influential contemporary leaders. The findings revealed three major narratives that are central to the self-preservation of the Iranian regime: 1) establishing a government representing true or pure Islam; 2) protecting the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Revolution; and 3) fighting oppression and imperialism. These narratives serve as the backdrop or context for the sacred carriers and religious tools the Iranian regime could use to mobilize or launch attacks against U.S. interests at home or abroad.

1. Iran's Sacred Carriers

The following sacred carriers stood out as the most relevant within major narratives described above: a) the Supreme Leader of Iran, b) the Day of Ashura commemoration, and c) al-Mahdi—the Hidden Imam and promised savior in Twelver Shia Islam. For the purposes of this research, a sacred carrier plays the role of a catalyst, a trigger, or an enabler to further propagate meaning and action. The following bullet points briefly describe each sacred carrier.

- The position of Supreme Leader in Iran is perhaps the most powerful sacred carrier at this point in Iran's post-revolutionary history. Not only is the Supreme Leader the primary decision-maker in the Islamic Republic, he is also the deputy to the Hidden Imam, Mohammed al-Mahdi. While not all Iranians agree with the religious teachings of the current Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, it is his position as the IRGC commander-in-chief, and his political control over the three branches of government that makes him a living sacred carrier and the ultimate authoritarian in the Islamic Republic of Iran.⁷
- The Day of Ashura (the tenth day of the Islamic month of Muharram) marks the martyrdom of Imam Husayn, the grandson of the prophet Mohammed, and, according to Shia tradition, the rightful heir and divinely mandated leader of Islam. The commemoration of the Day of Ashura, therefore, represents a very powerful sacred carrier not only as a ritualistic tradition, but more importantly, as a sign of religious identity.⁸
- The twelfth "hidden" Imam, Mohammed al-Mahdi, believed by the Shia to be the promised savior of Islam, also functions as divinely appointed sacred carrier. It is al-Mahdi, the "Lord of the Age" who, according to Shia doctrine, will return to establish justice and Islamic law throughout the world. Moreover, the mere belief in the final appearance of al-Mahdi as Allah's appointed future world leader becomes a sacred carrier with millenarian implications.

2. Religious Tools

If the sacred carriers are the means "through which vitally important values are sustained and passed, and something true believers are willing to die for,"⁹ then the tools are complimentary, and become the mechanism for carrying out a potential religious action. The following religious tools are highlighted because they have been used by the Iranian regime in the past to mobilize followers for religious reasons, and/or the tool could pose a significant security risk or threat to the United States and Israel. Therefore, the primary religious tools described below include, but are not limited to: 1) the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and Basij militia, 2) Hezbollah, 3) martyrdom operations, 4) *The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 5) Friday prayers and the mosque, and 6) mass media, social media and propaganda.

⁷ Moghaddam, *The Psychology of Dictatorship*, 96–97.

⁸ Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), Kindle Locations 240–243.

⁹ Moghaddam, *The Psychology of Dictatorship*, 92.

- The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) functions as a religious toolbox, with its many conventional and asymmetric military units that serve to protect the Iranian regime. This includes its elite Qods force, which facilitates and conducts external operations worldwide, and the Basij Resistance Force or militia in charge of internal security.
- Hezbollah, a Lebanese-based Shia terrorist organization capable of operating worldwide, functions as Iran's proxy terrorist group. Hezbollah, translated as "Party of God," emerged in the mid-1980s as a Lebanese-based resistance movement against Israel's invasion of Lebanon. The organization has since grown to become a strong military force and a powerful political party in Lebanon. Iran's IRGC Qods Force was the driving force that created, funded, and trained Hezbollah in Lebanon.
- Martyrdom operations in the form of "human wave" attacks were used extensively by Iran during the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988). Depicted by the Khomeini regime as a battle between "good and evil," thousands of young men volunteered for martyrdom and became part of the "human wave" attacks against the Iraqi Army—using their bodies to detonate land mines and assault well-fortified Iraqi gun positions and tanks.¹⁰ As Shia Muslims memorialize the theme of martyrdom through the sacrifice of Husayn on the Day of Ashura, martyrs from the Iran–Iraq War to this day are remembered and celebrated in Iran.
- The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, as a religious tool, formally abolished the monarchy and permanently enshrined an Islamic system of governance. Ratified by the people in October 1979, Iran's constitution declares Twelver Shi'ism as the official state religion and articulates how this brand of Islamic law and government is to be enacted.
- Friday prayers are held just after noon usually in the town or neighborhood mosque. The Friday prayer is a communal prayer, which takes the place of the second of the five prayers Muslims offer daily. It is not uncommon for the Friday prayer message to be coordinated or directed by the religious elite and the Supreme Leader. The Friday prayer, therefore, becomes the weekly stopping point when faithful Muslims assemble, pray, and listen to what the ruling religious class in Iran wants them to understand and do.
- The media in all its forms is a tool at the regime's disposal to disseminate political and religious propaganda both inside and outside Iran. The ruling religious class in the Islamic Republic has essentially cleared the airwaves for the regime's preferred discourse by restricting the press, and banning access to YouTube and social media sites. Despite their own ban on social media, the supreme leader and other government officials use multiple

¹⁰ Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future*, Kindle Locations 1619–1634.

social media platforms—mostly in English and Arabic—to broadcast a specific message outside Iran’s borders.

C. PROJECT CONCLUSIONS

The findings and subsequent analyses from this research project do not suggest that the Iranian religious elite would sacrifice the regime’s existence for an “all out” apocalyptic or purely religious war. For the most part, Iran will act as a pragmatic nation-state as it seeks to improve its economy, exploit its natural resources, and shore up its armed forces to defend the country and protect the regime. Most experts and scholars agree, however, that Iran’s decision-making process is extremely complex and, more often than not, unpredictable.

The findings and analyses do indicate, however, that Iran would utilize the power of its sacred carriers and religious tools to complement an asymmetric war against the United States or to mobilize forces for a larger campaign or war, if needed. The evidence examined in the analysis supports the concept that Iran is using, and will continue to use, religious tools as part of a low profile, asymmetric war against the United States and Israel. Furthermore, the findings show the regime’s prolific use of social media—a tool the Supreme Leader uses, in part, to propagate religious ideology to a regional and worldwide audience.

Understanding Iran’s true intent and whether it reflects reality is a difficult, if not impossible, task. There are no clear cause-and-effect markers that can predict Iran’s next moves that are of consequence to the United States. However, as this thesis demonstrates and suggests, the religious tools and sacred carriers could be thought of as markers (or signs) within the context of Iran’s larger religious narratives. In essence, the markers and narratives can help provide the context behind the rhetoric, and give meaning to action.

Finally, this thesis recommends the Cynefin framework (pronounced *ku-nev-in*) as a method for U.S. policymakers and Western analysts to view and understand Iran. David J. Snowden and Mary E. Boone developed the Cynefin framework in the late 1990s to help executives “see things from new viewpoints, assimilate complex concepts,

and address real-world problems and opportunities.”¹¹ Of the five “sense-making” domains explained in the Cynefin framework, the “complex domain” best describes the Islamic Republic of Iran. By examining religious patterns, narratives and markers within the complex domain, and then applying the framework’s corresponding decision-making strategy, U.S. policymakers and analysts might more accurately interpret Iran’s complex scenarios—and make better decisions vis-à-vis Iran.

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¹¹ David J. Snowden and Mary E. Boone, “A Leader’s Framework for Decision Making,” *Harvard Business Review*, November 2007, 1–2, <http://hbr.org/2007/11/a-leaders-framework-for-decision-making/ar/1>. This report provides an easy-to-understand explanation of the Cynefin framework.

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I dedicate this thesis to my wife for her never-ending patience, understanding, and encouragement; to my children for their sacrifice and steadfastness in choosing the right; and to my mother for her faith, constant prayers and support on my behalf.

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. PROBLEM STATEMENT

This thesis topic fulfills a specific knowledge gap in U.S. policymakers' understanding of Iran's religious beliefs as trigger points for strategic actions against the United States. Trigger points are sacred carriers in the form of individual leaders, end-times beliefs, religious traditions, or divine justifications for starting political, military, or terrorist operations against the U.S. A sacred carrier is "a means through which vitally important values are sustained and passed on in cultures and something true believers are willing to die for."¹ This thesis also examines, as a major element of Iran's religious beliefs, the country's Shia end-times doctrine on how the earth will be governed before the Day of Judgment, and the extent to which these millenarian beliefs might affect the regime's actions.

As a theocracy, which holds elections but actually functions as a dictatorship, Iran's religious hierarchy holds ultimate authority over the nation-state administration. According to the Iranian constitution, the ultimate authority in Iran is a Grand Ayatollah, a Supreme Leader who also functions as a sacred carrier—one who serves as a *source of emulation* for Shia Muslims.² Iran, therefore, can and does use religion to justify strategic actions.

The "religious trigger," often signals a dividing line between Iran's hardliners—who continually press for a strict manifestation of Islamic values—and the relative moderates currently led by Iran's president, Hassan Rouhani, who favors a relaxing of Islamic values and more dialogue with the West.³ Iran's conservative or hardliner clerics, for example, supported former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's rise to power in 2005 with the belief that religious laws and values would "once again receive [due]

¹ Fathali Moghaddam, *The Psychology of Dictatorship* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2013), 92.

² Ibid., 168.

³ Fathali Moghaddam (online discussion, Center for Homeland Defense and Security Thesis Center Forum, August 8, 2014).

attention” after they had been weakened during reformist President Khatami’s two-terms in office (1997—2005).⁴ Therefore, the hardliners and moderates in Iran are involved in a constant “tug of war” with the hardliners continually asserting their power by promoting Islamic ideals and provoking Western powers.⁵ Iran’s Supreme Leader, then, becomes the ultimate arbiter—the man who has the “final say on many issues, especially when it comes to foreign policy and the nuclear issue.”⁶

The purposes of this research are twofold, applied and conceptual:

1. To assist U.S. policymakers, Intelligence Community members, and homeland security practitioners, in understanding Iranian sacred carriers, religious tools, and end-times justifications for political, military, and/or terrorist actions against the U.S., and
2. To contribute to the research body and understanding of this issue.

While the premise of this thesis explores Iran’s potential use of religious beliefs as triggers for strategic actions against the United States, this study begins with an important assumption: that Iran will first and foremost act as a pragmatic nation state. Ray Takeyh, in his book *Guardians of the Revolution*, underscores the notion that “Iran’s rulers should not be caricatured as messianic politicians seeking to implement obscure scriptural dictates for ushering in the end of the world through conflict and disorder. As with most leaders, they are interested in staying in power and will recoil from conduct that jeopardizes their domain.”⁷ It is assumed then, more often than not, that Iran’s ruling religious elite—moderate and conservative alike—will generally make practical decisions within a framework of Shia Islamic jurisprudence to strengthen their power, and the country’s standing in the region and world. The focus here is on the use of religion as a means to mobilize support, influence events, and perpetuate the regime.

⁴ A. Savyon and Y. Mansharof, *The Doctrine of Mahdism: In the Ideological and Political Philosophy of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Ayatollah Mesbah-eYazdi* (Washington, DC: Middle East Media Research Institute, May 2007), 7, http://www.memri.org/publicdocs/doctrine_of_mahdism.pdf.

⁵ Moghaddam, online discussion, August 8, 2014.

⁶ Mehdi Khalaji, *Tightening the Reins: How Khamenei Makes Decisions* (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 2014), 4, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/tightening-the-reins-how-khamenei-makes-decisions>.

⁷ Ray Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 257.

B. BACKGROUND

On November 4, 1979, young (and mostly student) supporters of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution of Iran stormed the U.S. Embassy in Tehran. The students—outraged that the deposed Shah of Iran had been admitted to the United States for medical treatment—captured 66 Americans and demanded the immediate release of the Shah in exchange for their prisoners. Opportunistically backed by Khomeini and fueled by a conspiracy theory that the United States was plotting to overthrow the Islamic revolution, the hostage takers held 52 American diplomats for 444 days.⁸

Although many in Iran opposed the U.S. Embassy siege, the radical hardliners were willing to use violence to crush opposition.⁹ Their brute force tactics were spurred on as the U.S. would not agree to extradite the Shah. Eventually, the U.S. Embassy siege rallied the public behind Khomeini, helping him to ultimately dismiss Iran’s provisional government led by the moderate Prime Minister Mehdi Barzargan. Shortly thereafter, Iran passed a constitutional referendum based on the concept of an Islamic Republic—a theocratic regime with direct clerical oversight of the government.¹⁰ In the wake of the 1979 hostage crisis, and the ensuing formation of an Islamic government, the United States and Iran severed official diplomatic relations. As a result, the subsequent relationship between the two countries has been marked by more than 30 years of animosity, distrust, and misunderstanding.

Since the death of Khomeini in 1989, the Islamic Republic of Iran continues as a theocracy, and is supervised by Khomeini’s successor, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The Iranian constitution grants the Supreme Leader authority over all branches of the Iranian government, to include the military and the state-run media. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was formed after the 1979 revolution to

⁸ Ibid., 27, 35.

⁹ Moghaddam, online discussion, August 8, 2014.

¹⁰ Gary Sick, “The Carter Administration,” *The Iran Primer*, accessed June 7, 2014, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/carter-administration-0>.

protect the Islamic Republic and its Supreme Leader. The IRGC's top commanders report to directly to Ayatollah Khamenei.

The Supreme Leader and IRGC retain control over Iran's most lethal weapons systems as well as Iran's economic lifeline—the oil and gas industry—and they act as patron to Hezbollah, a Lebanese-based Shia terrorist organization capable of operating worldwide. The regime also supports Hamas, a militant Palestinian Sunni organization, in their resistance against Israel. Perhaps of most concern to the United States and Israel, however, is the widely held belief that Iran—through its uranium enrichment program—may be close to developing a nuclear weapon, which would significantly change the balance of power in the Middle East. Khamenei and the ruling clergy in Iran, for the most part, continue to perceive the United States and Israel as enemies, oppressors, and direct threats to the tenets of the Islamic Republic.

Iran, formerly known as Persia, is home to almost 80 million people. The majority of Iranians identify with a strong sense of Persian nationalism, history, and culture. Knowing contemporary Iran, however, requires a thorough understanding of Shia Islam—particularly the Twelver branch—and the context surrounding Iranian history and current events dating back to the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Twelver Shi'ism, also known as *Twelvers*, is the sect of Shia Islam practiced by Iran's Supreme Leader and the majority of Iran's Muslims.¹¹ Twelvers believe in a line of 12 Imams who are the divinely ordained political and religious leaders of Islam and direct descendants of the Prophet Mohammed.¹² The twelfth imam, Mohammed al-Mahdi, went into occultation in 873 CE as a child. Twelvers believe that *the Mahdi* will return to redeem Islam by defeating its enemies and rule the world under Islamic law. In essence, the Iran's Supreme Leader considers himself a placeholder for the return of the Mahdi and, according to Ayatollah Khomeini, can exercise “the missing Imam's authority on Earth.”¹³

¹¹ Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism*, xi, xiii.

¹² Sadjadpour, “The Supreme Leader.”

¹³ Ibid.

C. RESEARCH QUESTION

What sacred carriers and religious tools could the Iranian regime use to mobilize or launch attacks against United States interests at home or abroad? This exploratory study will contribute, through rigorous research, to the understanding of an emerging phenomenon—a thorough analysis of Twelver Shia Islam’s sacred carriers, religious tools, and end-times beliefs that could prompt or justify hostile Iranian action against the United States. This research does not try to predict whether Iran would act upon its religious beliefs or the specific actions it might employ. Rather, it examines the religious options—the sacred carriers and tools—that could play a key role in future Iranian aggression directed at the United States.

D. METHOD AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The research methodology utilized in this thesis follows a qualitative grounded theory approach. Rather than beginning with a hypothesis, this project begins with a narrowed topic and a research question. Then, using a systematic process to gather, process, and analyze data, the goal is to advance a theory, a framework, or a conceptual analysis based on careful examination of emerging patterns and concepts. According to Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin in their book *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, “theory derived from data is more likely to resemble the ‘reality’ than is theory derived by putting together a series of concepts based on experience or solely through speculation (how one thinks things ought to work).”¹⁴

This study, therefore, applies an inductive reasoning approach to large amounts of data—mostly primary sources relating to Iran’s religious beliefs. According to Strauss and Corbin, grounded theories are drawn from data that “are likely to offer insight,

¹⁴ Anselm L. Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998), 12.

enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action.”¹⁵ The following qualitative, grounded theory methods are used to accomplish this research objective.¹⁶

1. Research Steps

Step 1: Capture and analyze data using open coding. Open coding is “the analytic process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in data.”¹⁷ Data are broken down and coded, or systematically classified as phenomena, ideas, or themes that ultimately emerge into categories. As open coding occurs, analytic memos, or notes are written that describe concepts—the building blocks of theory.¹⁸

In this research, open coding begins by examining data collected specifically from the doctrine and history of Twelver Shia Islam—the brand practiced by the Supreme Leader and the most influential leaders inside Iran. Primary sources consist of the *Quran*, and speeches from key leaders to include their social media feeds, websites, and religious rulings. Official government statements and *The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran* are also coded. Secondary sources—derived from expert analysis, press reports, and academic literature—are also collected and analyzed for context and insight.

Step 2: Categorize the data as themes and concepts emerge from the open coding process. Organizing the data into categories or phenomena refines the collection process, allowing for a more focused, selective coding process. At this stage, the research question and analytic focus can also be refined if needed, and data collection and analysis continues. The goal is to reach a point of “theoretical saturation” where, according to Strauss and Corbin, “no new properties, dimensions, or relationships emerge during analysis.”¹⁹

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ The captions for steps 1–5 are adapted from an online lecture by Lauren Wollman, “Qualitative Research” (online lecture, Center for Homeland Security and Defense, Naval Postgraduate School, n.d.). https://www.chds.us/coursefiles/research/lectures/research_qualitative_methods/data/downloads/chds%20articulate%20notes-qualitative%20research.pdf

¹⁷ Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research*, 101.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 143.

Step 3: Identify patterns and connections within categories. This step also can be described as axial coding as “coding occurs around the axis of a category, linking categories at the level of properties and dimensions.”²⁰ The objective of step three is to identify relationships, concepts, or patterns within categories that could lead to the development of a theory.

Step 4: Develop a theoretical interpretation by integrating and interpreting patterns and connections within categories. The end state of step four presents a theory based on an analysis of the findings. The relevance of the findings should be explained in the context of the research project, and they must ultimately support the project’s final conclusions.²¹

2. Coding Methodology

The process of capturing, coding and analyzing data was accomplished using Evernote. Evernote is a multifaceted mobile, web and computer-based commercial (software) tool used by many to capture, save, sync, and organize information. Evernote’s document photo feature and web clipping tool were used extensively to take photos of specific paragraphs or pages within books, or to clip relevant articles or speeches from online sources.

Once captured within Evernote, the information was analyzed—usually with written notes—marked up as needed, and then coded by applying a descriptive tag to the research note. The coded or tagged notes were organized in Evernote folders, categorized by primary or secondary sources, and further delineated by author or source. As themes and concepts emerged from the open coding process, an additional Evernote “working” document captured ideas for potential categories, with references back to the original source notes. The potential categories were then examined for patterns and connections and then grouped in to a final set of related categories or themes.

²⁰ Ibid., 123.

²¹ Wollman, “Qualitative Research” (Center for Homeland Defense and Security, Naval Postgraduate School, n.d.), slide 19.

E. SIGNIFICANCE TO THE FIELD

Hashemi Rafsanjani, Iran's president from 1989–1997 purportedly told a foreign visitor, “If you want to want to know us, become a Shia first.”²² It is difficult for the Western observer—whose religious and political paradigm arises from a separation between church and state—to understand a nation-state and culture that, through the revolution and power monopoly by the religious radicals, has come to be ruled by a religious class.²³

It is critical for Western scholars, government analysts, and policymakers, therefore, to understand the religious doctrine, the narratives, the sacred carriers and religious tools the Islamic Republic of Iran might use to justify action against the United States. The significance to the field, then, is to provide a conceptual framework of religious markers or triggers that will contribute to a greater understanding of religious-based threats and/or rhetoric emanating from Iran.

F. PARAMETERS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

This study employs a purposeful sampling strategy that examines the most influential individuals and organizations within the Islamic Republic of Iran—those who hold or influence the ultimate decision-making power within the regime. For example, the Supreme Leader, the Guardian Council, and leaders of the Revolutionary Guard make strategic decisions and hold the reins of power; however, since 1989—when the prime minister position was eliminated through a constitutional revision—Iran's presidents have sustained large followings and, as a result, have considerable influence within the regime. For the purposes of this study, only the leaders and organizations that currently hold, or have held, power within the Islamic Republic of Iran are analyzed.

While Chapters III and IV offer a brief, but essential, historical and present-day context for the reader, this thesis does not explore Iran's contemporary political movements. It also does not dive deeply into issues surrounding Iran's enrichment of

²² Hooman Majd, *The Ayatollah Begs to Differ: The Paradox of Modern Iran* (New York: Anchor Books, 2009), 18.

²³ Moghaddam, online discussion, August 8, 2014.

uranium for the potential development of a nuclear weapon. From a historical standpoint, this thesis mostly analyzes the historical context and documents surrounding the 1979 Islamic Revolution to present. It does, however, bring to the forefront significant historical events and political issues that have significantly shaped Iran and Shia Islam, from the formation of Islam to the current day.

G. THESIS OVERVIEW

1. Chapter II—Literature Review

The literature review is an essay about the literature examined as part of this study. Most of the literature supporting this thesis falls within three major categories: 1) doctrinal and historical research on Iranian Twelver Shia Islam, 2) expository writings about Iranian millenarianism and Twelver Shia narratives, and 3) primary and secondary sources covering Iran's current political, religious, and military affairs.

2. Chapter III—History and Context

The history and context chapter provides a background of Iran's recent history, and important elements of Shia Islamic doctrine that are most relevant to this research. The significance of the martyrdom of Husayn, the origins of Shia Islam, as well as the belief in the occultation of the Twelfth Imam will also be discussed as a lead to Khomeinism and a discussion about the current regime.

3. Chapter IV—The Current Regime

The current regime chapter discusses the formal and informal roles and functions of the Supreme Leader and the Guardian Council, as well as the importance and missions of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Chapter IV also discusses the office of the presidency, and briefly examines other contemporary issues germane to the research question—such as internal affairs and the nuclear enrichment dilemma, and how Iran's oil and gas reserves impact the regime.

4. Chapter V—Findings

This chapter presents the findings discovered after applying the grounded theory method to the most relevant data samples (see method and research design above). It

discusses the relevant categories found during the coding process and then connects them into three all-encompassing themes, or religious narratives that serve as the context for the analysis. The collection of narratives presented in this chapter, therefore, becomes the religious frameworks for Iranian aggression. They are the backdrops, or context, to the sacred carriers and tools—the enabling factors the Iranian regime could use to attack the United States or its interests.

5. Chapter VI—Analysis

The analysis chapter begins by introducing and examining Iran’s most prominent sacred carriers and religious tools. The core of this chapter discusses how the Iranian regime might use the carriers and tools—against the backdrop of narratives from Chapter V—to mobilize or launch attacks against U.S. interests at home or abroad. This chapter presents three assessments that examine Iran’s sacred carriers and religious tools through the paradigms of past, present, and future scenarios. These three scenarios pull the findings and analysis together into examples that are relevant to U.S. national security interests.

6. Chapter VI—Conclusion

The final chapter discusses project conclusions and final observations. It recommends the Cynefin framework—an analytical decision-making framework—as a model for U.S. policymakers and analysts to understand Iran’s complex theocratic regime and then respond accordingly. The final section provides recommendations for further research, lists additional research questions, and gives interested scholars possible next steps to examine this topic in greater detail.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

While a great deal of literature was analyzed as part of this review, there were very few scholarly documents that specifically addressed this project's research question. Notably, there is a large genre of Christian apocalyptic literature that addresses Islam's role in Christian end-times beliefs. Some conclusions from Christian writers attempt to partially address this project's research question; however, their findings (although cited and documented) are generally biased and are not used as sources in this thesis.

Most of the literature pertaining to this research is therefore complementary, and falls within three major categories: 1) doctrinal and historical research on Iranian Twelver Shia Islam, 2) expository writings about Iranian millenarianism and Twelver Shia narratives, and 3) primary and secondary sources covering Iran's current political, religious, and military affairs. The following paragraphs survey the literature within these three categories.

A. DOCTRINAL AND HISTORICAL LITERATURE

For the purposes of this essay and the research at hand, the history of Twelver Shia Islam dates back to 873 CE with the occultation of the Twelfth Imam, Mohammad al-Mahdi, "the guided one," who is often referred to as the *Hidden Imam*.²⁴ In 1985, Moojan Momen wrote a very detailed historical and doctrinal introduction to Twelver Shia Islam. The book, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism*, introduces the reader to modern critical research on Shia Islam as well as traditional accounts of Shia history—in particular, how Shias see themselves and the passions that mark their commemorations.²⁵ Momen devotes a chapter to the Twelfth Imam, "his occultation and return," and he discusses the doctrinal Shia jurisprudence, religious hierarchy, and the different schools within Twelver Shi'ism. Although the book was written in 1985, its 363 pages constitute the most thoroughly researched doctrinal

²⁴ Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future*, Kindle Locations 738–740.

²⁵ Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism*, xiv.

and historical account of Twelver Shi'ism in this review, and probably within the historical scholarship of Shia Islam.

Dr. Abdulaziz Sachedina, professor of Religious Studies at the University of Virginia, has written several works on Islamic messianism. His book on the same topic focuses on Twelver Shia messianic doctrine. One of Dr. Sachedina's motives for writing the book, published in 1980, was to examine the literature and make his findings available to other scholars.²⁶ Dr. Sachedina credits his success in interpreting religious Shia messianic writings to his sources in Mashhad, Iran and Najaf, Iraq.²⁷ This work, while dated, seems to be a very balanced academic survey of Twelver Shia messianic literature. Dr. Sachedina's review and scholarly commentary on Twelver Shia doctrine complements Momen's work by providing another resource with which to compare religious doctrine.

Shaykh Muhammad Kabbani, a Sunni scholar and chairman of the Islamic Supreme Council of America, brings a Sunni perspective of the Mahdi to the body of literature. Although the traditions of a "Mahdi," or an Islamic messiah, differ in origin and concept between the Sunni and the Shia, Kabbani goes to the most original source accepted by both branches of Islam—the Prophet Mohammed. In his book *The Approach of Armageddon: An Islamic Perspective*, Shaykh Kabbani references the widely accepted Sahih *hadith* (sayings or traditions of the prophet).

B. EXPOSITORY WORKS

A preliminary review of contemporary essays and books on Iranian millenarianism and Twelver Shia narratives uncovered promising results. For example, the book *Shi'ism: A Religion of Protest*, written by Dr. Hamid Dabashi, a renowned Iranian-American professor of Iranian Studies at Columbia University, is perhaps the deepest, most analytical of all the expository writings. Written in 2011, Dabashi expounds on the doctrinal and historical, the contemporary, and the ritualistic aspects of

²⁶ Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism*, ix.

²⁷ Ibid.

Shi'ism that make it what it is today—"a religion of protest."²⁸ Dabashi explains: "at the heart of Shi'ism remains the trauma of a denial—that Ali was denied his right to succeed the Prophet as his divinely ordained deputy; and a trauma of betrayal—that Hossein [grandson of the Prophet Mohammed] was invited... to reclaim his murdered father's right but was left to be murdered along with a handful of his closest comrades."²⁹ The above themes, analyzed by Dabashi, constitute some of the most important religious narratives outlined in future chapters.

Two relatively recent articles in the journal *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* bring to light current messianic rumblings in Iran and the larger Shia Crescent.³⁰ Dr. Bernd Kaussler, associate professor of political science at James Madison University, writes in his 2012 article, "Is The End Nigh for the Islamic Republic?," about a recent "country-wide resurgence in messianic activity and rhetoric."³¹ The second notable journal article, "Messianism in the Shiite Crescent," written by David Cook, associate professor of Religious Studies at Rice University, examines the signs and doctrines of the Mahdi's reappearance and how these beliefs are, or are not, emerging in the present-day Shiite Crescent.

Another author, Abbas Amanat, should be mentioned as one of the leading contemporary scholars on Shi'a millenarianism. Dr. Amanat, a professor of history at Yale University, published *Apocalyptic Islam and Iranian Shi'ism* in 2009. An endorsement on the inside cover claims that Amanat's research "will set the agenda for future scholarship in this area."³² Amanat examines many different angles of messianic aspirations in contemporary Iran—mostly in his final chapter. Of note is his cultural analysis of the Iranian youth's interest in miracle messianic cults and congregational

²⁸ Hamid Dabashi, *Shi'ism: A Religion of Protest* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 83.

²⁹ Ibid., 23.

³⁰ The Shia Crescent is made up of the Middle Eastern countries where most of the Shia Muslims reside. When observed on a map the countries—Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon—form a crescent shape.

³¹ Bernd Kaussler, "Is The End Nigh for the Islamic Republic?," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, Hudson Institute 13 (July 27, 2012): 71.

³² Abbas Amanat, *Apocalyptic Islam and Iranian Shi'ism*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009).

prayers “hastening the return of the Hidden Imam.”³³ A more thorough look at Amanat’s writings will likely shed light on the cultural aspects of Iranian millenarianism—a factor that should not be overlooked as part of this research.

C. PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SOURCES

1. Primary Sources

The book *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, translated and annotated by Hamid Algar in 1981, is this project’s leading primary source for analyzing Ayatollah Khomeini’s major works before, during, and immediately following the 1979 revolution. The most important of Khomeini’s works—essentially the foundational document for the 1979 Islamic Republic of Iran—is his treatise titled *Islamic Government*. In this book, Khomeini presents his case and evidence for instituting an Islamic government on Earth.

The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, adopted on October 24, 1979, and amended in July 1989, establishes an Islamic form of government based on belief in “one God” and “the exclusive attribution of sovereignty and the legislation of law to Him, and the necessity of surrender to His commands.”³⁴ As a primary source, and of paramount importance to this thesis, Iran’s constitution provides a real-world example of how Iran integrates Shia Islam into its current government.

Moving to the regime’s current leadership, the literature survey mostly includes primary sources from Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, the primary decision-maker in Iran and the one most likely to influence Iran’s posture toward peace or aggression. There is a rich selection of primary and secondary sources that expound on Khamenei’s viewpoints relevant to this project’s research question. The literature describing Khamenei’s views comes in several forms: primary sources from the Khamenei and Iranian government websites (which one can assume is propaganda), and secondary, state-run media reports quoting Khamenei (which one can assume are biased).

³³ Ibid., 226.

³⁴ Firoozeh Papan-Matin (trans.), “The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (1989 Edition),” *Iranian Studies* 47, no. 1 (September 27, 2013): 166.

Khamenei's website, The Office of the Supreme Leader: Sayyid Ali Khamenei, for example, contains English translations of his speeches, a library of Islamic laws, as well as a page of frequently asked questions.³⁵ The website functions as a well-organized library containing the Supreme Leader's current and archived speeches, messages and letters, teachings, and viewpoints on numerous topics—to include his end-times beliefs with regard to the Mahdi. In addition to his English website, Khamenei also uses social media to shape the narrative he wishes to portray about Iran. As of June 2014, Khamenei's English Twitter account (@khamenei_ir) claims more than 57,000 followers.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the sixth president of Iran and former mayor of Tehran, is well known for his uniquely bold and religiously themed speeches at the annual United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). Ahmadinejad's UNGA speeches and many of his writings and interviews are available as primary sources. Additionally, the primary sources for his successor, Hassan Rouhani, include speeches and quotes from the Islamic Republic of Iran's Presidency—English website. Hassan Rouhani also has an official Twitter account (@HassanRouhani).

2. Secondary Sources

In order to understand the contextual narratives and events leading to the 1979 Islamic Revolution, one must understand the regime prior to the revolution. This is where Dr. Abbas Milani's contemporary book, *The Shah*, helps one comprehend, as objectively as possible, the king of Iran and the hostile environment before the revolution. Abbas Milani, director of Iranian Studies at Stanford University, wrote this 2012 biography of Mohammad-Reza Shah Pahlevi, because, as he states, "a new look at the Shah's life, free from the excesses of his overzealous defenders and detractors, is now not only possible but more than ever necessary."³⁶

One of the most useful and oft-cited textbooks on Iran is *The Iran Primer*, sponsored by the United States Institute for Peace and edited by Robin Wright. The book

³⁵ Ali Khamenei, "The Office of the Supreme Leader, Sayyid Ali Khamenei," accessed October 6, 2013, <http://www.leader.ir/langs/en/>.

³⁶ Abbas Milani, *The Shah* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), Kindle Locations 85–86.

is in print, but its articles are also compiled on the “The Iran Primer” website. The site states that as “the world’s most comprehensive website on Iran, ‘The Primer’ brings together 50 experts—Western and Iranian—in concise chapters on politics, economy, military, foreign policy, and the nuclear program. It chronicles events under six U.S. presidents. It also has leader bios, timelines, data on nuclear sites, and context for what lies ahead.” For example, one of the writers for *The Iran Primer*, Karim Sadjadpour, an Iran expert and senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, provides a concise yet thorough essay about Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Dr. Abbas Milani, also writes a “Primer” article about Iran’s Green Movement.

Mehdi Khalaji, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and a Qom-trained Shiite theologian, writes a very timely 2014 article titled, “Tightening the Reins: How Khamenei Makes Decisions.” Khalaji’s insight is especially important given that he was trained in Qom—one of Iran’s holiest cities and a location where clerics are trained in the many Shia seminaries. Khalaji’s article presents a thorough look at how Khamenei balances power between the country’s many factions and religious elites, and most importantly, why after 25 years as Supreme Leader, Khamenei has gradually seized and maintains most of the power in Iran.

While the Supreme Leader is the most powerful leader in Iran, there are other leaders, councils, and organizations within Iran that yield considerable influence. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), for example, was formed after the 1979 revolution to protect the Islamic Republic and the Supreme Leader.³⁷ The IRGC’s top commanders control many facets of Iran’s political, commercial, and military apparatus.

A 2014 Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment on Iran provides an exhaustive analysis on the various branches of the IRGC to include the Revolutionary Guard’s elite Qods Force and the Basij Militia. The Jane’s Iran country assessment, in fact, addresses all facets of the Islamic Republic’s government, military, and political structure. Additionally, a September 2013 report from the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) titled, “Pushback: Countering the Iran Action Network,” elaborates further on

³⁷ Alireza Nader, “The Revolutionary Guards,” *The Iran Primer*, accessed October 6, 2013, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/revolutionary-guards>.

the nature and mission of the IRGC Qods Force, Hezbollah, and the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS).

In 2010, the Rand Corporation under a contract with the Office of the Secretary of Defense, published *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads*³⁸: *An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*. The book's objective is to provide a "framework to help policymakers and analysts better understand existing and evolving leadership dynamics driving Iranian decisionmaking."³⁹ One of the primary conclusions in this book, as well as many other scholarly reports, is that Iran's governing process relies on key personalities and factions within informal networks to get business done. The Rand book, therefore, dedicates one full chapter to understanding the complexity of Iran's factionalism and informal networks.

In June 2013, Hassan Rouhani succeeded Ahmadinejad as Iran's new president. Many in the United States are wondering, and speculating, how Iran might change under new presidential leadership. A survey of current writings yielded many well thought essays from Iran experts. One such expert is Suzanne Maloney from the Brookings Institution. Her *Foreign Affairs* magazine article on "Why Rouhani Won—And Why Khamenei Let Him" is a thoughtful analysis of Rouhani's political, military, and religious background and, of course, why the Supreme Leader allowed his election.

Two scholarly books in particular provide a general but useful perspective of Shi'ism in Iran and in the Middle East region. Vali Nasr's book, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*, provides a thorough analysis of the current Shia revival within Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran. Nasr's work is well regarded by academic scholars and is a valuable resource in understanding Iran's influence amongst the Shia throughout the Middle East. The other book, by Ray Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs*, underscores a religious, but

³⁸ David E. Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics* (Santa Monica, CA:RAND, 2010), 25. Bonyads are foundations "which function as independent economic entities and patronage networks unaccountable to the state." The Supreme Leader appoints the bonyad directors.

³⁹ Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads*, Preface.

more pragmatic side of Iran and how the power struggles play out in “the age of the Ayatollahs.”

Finally, Dr. Fathali M. Moghaddam, a professor of psychology and director of the Conflict Resolution Program at Georgetown University, has written several books that help in understanding a complex Iranian regime from a global and psychological perspective. For example, his book *The Psychology of Dictatorship* presents a contemporary model whereby one can examine the ideology of Iran’s theocratic dictatorship, and the psychological processes behind it. Moghaddam discusses the importance of sacred carriers, and how the Iranian regime will, using religion, justify its actions to maintain control.

D. CONCLUSION

The principal strength of the literature reviewed in this project is the numerous historical, doctrinal, and scholarly works that examine the complexities of Shia Islam from many viewpoints. For the purposes of this study, however, the primary gap or weakness is that most of the literature does not specifically address proposed research question: *What sacred carriers and religious tools could the Iranian regime use to mobilize or launch attacks against United States interests at home or abroad?*

This review highlighted several scholarly works that begin to answer the above question; however, an analysis of the primary and secondary sources encompassing Iranian current affairs will always be the most important and perhaps the most difficult to interpret. Primary sources such as Khamenei’s speeches or reports will be controlled. And secondary sources that expound on what is happening in Iran may be biased or agenda-driven. Going forward, then, the research goal is to present the foundational Shia doctrine in the next chapter by briefly looking at Iran’s history and context, and in following chapters, to synthesize the literature and apply a research methodology to analyze the words and actions of Iran’s most influential leaders and organizations.

III. HISTORY AND CONTEXT

To fully understand the current discourse in the Islamic Republic of Iran, one must understand its long history, its rich culture, and ultimately, how Shia Islam has shaped Iran's current destiny. While the subject of this chapter merits its own separate and much larger study, its scope has been narrowed to focus primarily on the history of Shia Islam and the events leading to the 1979 Islamic Revolution. This chapter begins with the origins of Shia Islam, it reviews Shia messianic doctrine, and then progresses through several momentous events before, during, and after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. By understanding the historical and contextual frames highlighted in this chapter, the reader will be able to successfully navigate through the remainder of this thesis.

A. TWELVER SHIA ISLAM AND THE MARTYRDOM OF HUSAYN

Following the Islamic Prophet Mohammed's death in 632 CE, the succession of leadership fell to one of Mohammed's closest companions and father-in-law, Abu Bakr.⁴⁰ While Abu Bakr was generally recognized as the first Caliph—leader of the Muslim community (*umma*)—many of the prophet's companions believed the line of succession should have stayed within the prophet's bloodline family.⁴¹ According to a prominent *Hadith*,⁴² Mohammed delivered a final sermon in 632 where he declared, according to the Shia account, that his son-in-law and cousin, Ali ibn Abi Taleb, should be his successor.

Thus, listen, obey, and submit to the command of your Lord, for Allah, the mighty and the majestic, is your master (*Mawla*), then [His Messenger], Muhammad, who is now addressing you, is your master. Then, after me, Ali is your master (*Wali*) and your leader (*Imam*) by the command of Allah, your Lord. Then, leadership shall be in my progeny, within his offspring, until the Day you meet Allah and His Messenger.⁴³

⁴⁰ Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, 10.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 20–22.

⁴² "In Islam, Hadith refers to that which is attributed to the Prophet [Mohammed]... as words, actions or approvals, physical features and characteristics." (Source: <http://www.islamic-dictionary.com/index.php?word=hadith>)

⁴³ "The Last Sermon of Muhammad," *Wikisource*, accessed April 20, 2014, http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Last_Sermon_of_Muhammad_by_Shia_Accounts.

The Shia version of the Hadith proclaims not only that Ali should be Mohammed's heir, but also that the future leadership of Islam—referred to as the *Imamate* in Shia Islam—would flow through Mohammed's progeny. While this Hadith is phrased and interpreted differently by Sunni Muslims, the belief that Ali was the first rightful heir to the Prophet Mohammed, and thus the first imam, is a foundational Shia belief; it is at this point of doctrine where Shia Islam splits with the more mainstream Sunni branch.⁴⁴ The map in Figure 1 shows Shiites as a percentage of the Muslim population in the Middle East. At present, approximately 90% of the Muslim population worldwide belongs to the Sunni branch.⁴⁵



Figure 1. Shiites as a Percentage of the Middle East Muslim Population.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism*, 5–6.

⁴⁵ Joseph Liu, “Mapping the Global Muslim Population,” Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project, October 7, 2009, <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/10/07/mapping-the-global-muslim-population/>.

⁴⁶ Stephen Crittenden, “The Clash Within Civilisations: How The Sunni-Shiite Divide Cleaves The Middle East,” *The Global Mail*, August 22, 2012, <http://static.theglobalmail.org/feature/the-clash-within-civilisations-how-the-sunni-shiite-divide-cleaves-the-middle-east/349/>.

1. The Battle of Karbala and Martyrdom of Husayn ibn Ali

The foundations of Shia Islam and its contemporary manifestations are deeply rooted in one particular event—the Battle of Karbala (in present-day Iraq) and the Martyrdom of Husayn ibn Ali (son of Ali), the Prophet Mohammed’s grandson.⁴⁷ Ali was eventually appointed as the fourth caliph; however, following his death, Ali’s eldest son, Hasan, abdicated the caliphate to the Umayyad leader, Mu’awiya, as a compromise for peace.⁴⁸ The Shia followers of Ali, however, maintained that Husayn, Ali’s youngest and only remaining son, was the rightful heir and divinely mandated leader of Islam.⁴⁹

Husayn would not give his oath of allegiance to Yazid, the Umayyad caliph and successor to Mu’awiya, prompting the caliph to send an army to confront Husayn and his followers. The thousand-strong Umayyad army met Husayn and 72 of his companions during the Muslim holy month of Muharram in what is now present day Karbala, Iraq.⁵⁰ According to Shia tradition, Husayn and his band fought valiantly, knowing they would sacrifice their lives for their cause. Husayn and his entire band were slaughtered and beheaded on the 10th day of Muharram in 680 CE. In both the Sunni and Shia traditions, Husayn and his companions are considered martyrs. In the Shia tradition, however, Husayn’s martyrdom is commemorated annually on the Day of Ashura—the 10th day of Muharram in the Muslim calendar.

Martyrdom is a recurring theme in Shia Islam. Husayn and 72 of his companions became the ultimate example of sacrifice; the number 72 in the Shia tradition symbolizes martyrdom.⁵¹ In his book *The Shia Revival*, Vali Nasr explains: “Shias believe that martyrdom is the highest testament to faith, following the example of the imams, a deed that will gain the martyr entry into paradise just as it will strengthen Shiism.”⁵²

⁴⁷ Momen, *An Introduction to Shi‘i Islam*, 33.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 27.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 28.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 30–31.

⁵¹ Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future*, Kindle Location 367.

⁵² Ibid., Kindle Locations 611–613.

Martyrdom, then, also becomes important in the Iranian tradition—an important theme that will be highlighted throughout this thesis.

2. The Day of Ashura

For devout Shia Muslims, the first 10 days of Muharram and especially the tenth day, Ashura, is a time for deep internal reflection and mourning for Husayn. In many Shia communities, the Day of Ashura is marked by a processional of men marching down streets, self-flagellating with chains, and chanting “Ya Husayn” to the beat of drums. In the community mosque, the sheikh narrates the story of the Battle of Karbala—allowing his followers to hear and feel the tragedy of Husayn’s unjust martyrdom, and to reiterate the doctrine that Ali and Husayn were Mohammed’s divinely appointed heirs.

The Day of Ashura is not only a time to mourn the martyrdom of Husayn but also a time to reflect upon the injustices, sufferings, and oppression the Shia have endured since the Battle of Karbala to the present day. In his book *Islamic Messianism*, Dr. Abdulaziz Sachedina describes Ashura as occupying a “significant position in Shi’i history as well as in its piety. The martyrdom of al-Husayn on this day... stands as a climax of Shi’i suffering and passion. As a result, the day generates more than anything else a belief in the redemption of the *umma* [Muslim community] through the sufferings of the son of ‘Ali and Fatima.”⁵³

The annual commemoration of Ashura and its themes of martyrdom, victimhood, suffering and injustice have a multitude of modern-day applications for the Shia in Iran. During the 1979 Islamic revolution, for example, Khomeini effectively used the notions of injustice and suffering against tyranny and worldly oppression to mobilize the masses for revolutionary political ends.⁵⁴ Not long after the revolution, Khomeini called upon the Iranian youth to perform the ultimate sacrifice of martyrdom during the Iran–Iraq War, which will be discussed in more detail in Section D of this chapter.

⁵³ Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism*, 157.

⁵⁴ Kaussler, “Is The End Nigh for the Islamic Republic?,” 71.

3. The Imamate—Succession of Imams in Twelver Shia Islam

The Twelver Shi'ite Imamate, or *Imamah*, consists of the line of leaders, all descendants of Mohammed, beginning with Ali as the first imam, to the twelfth imam, Mohammed ibn al-Hasan, also known as Mohammed al-Mahdi.⁵⁵ Unlike Sunni Islam, the Shia recognize these imams as divinely appointed representatives of Allah, who like the Prophet Mohammed, are given spiritual authority through the line of Ali and his wife Fatima, the prophet's daughter.⁵⁶ After the death of Ali, each imam was successively martyred until the Twelfth Imam, Mohammed al-Mahdi, who went into hiding as a child in 873 CE to protect his life.⁵⁷

Dr. Hamid Dabashi, a renowned Iranian-American professor of Iranian Studies at Columbia University, summarized the importance of the Shia *Imamah* in his book "Shi'ism: A Religion of Protest":

Islam, for the Shi'is, is in effect incomplete; the cycle of *Nubuwwah* [Prophethood] is historically interrupted if it is not carried forward in the institution of the *Imamah*. Considering that practically all Shi'i imams, with the exception of the twelfth who is hidden and in occultation, are commonly and doctrinally believed to have been martyred, killed in their youth by their adversaries, *shahadat* [martyrdom] becomes constitutional to the Shi'ite ideal of heroism.⁵⁸

Another significant implication from the Shia doctrine of the Imamate is the hope and expectation that through Ali's line, the rightful Imams, "could and would rule with true guidance from a purified Islam."⁵⁹ In other words, the Shia believe that it is only through a descendant of Ali and Fatima, that Islamic justice will be delivered to the world before the end of time.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism*, 8–9.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 17–18.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 8.

⁵⁸ Dabashi, *Shi'ism: A Religion of Protest*, 85.

⁵⁹ Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism*, 7.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 17.

B. THE OCCULTATION AND ROLE OF THE HIDDEN IMAM

Twelver Shias believe that the Twelfth Imam, Mohammed al-Mahdi (the Mahdi), went into occultation in 873 CE as a five-year-old child to protect his life. They also believe that he is the permanent imam and “Lord of the Age,” who will reappear and redeem Islam and bring justice to the world before the Day of Judgment.⁶¹ The term occultation in Shia tradition means that the Mahdi is not dead, but miraculously preserved and hidden from the world until Allah initiates his reappearance. According to Sachedina, “the role assigned to al-Mahdi...at the end of human history, is the fulfillment of the mission of all these great prophets [the Imamate]. He is the victorious Imam who will restore the purity of the Faith, which will bring true and uncorrupted guidance to all mankind.”⁶²

Traditional Shia accounts portray the Mahdi returning as a “vengeful figure who will first take vengeance upon those Sunni Muslims who have opposed the rights of the family of the Prophet Muhammad to rule and who will then establish a messianic state that will encompass the world.”⁶³ David Cook, an associate professor of Religious Studies at Rice University, writes:

The classical sources are unclear about whether or not the Mahdi will convert humankind to Islam. What the sources do make clear is that the Mahdi will be especially ruthless toward existing Islamic religious establishments: he will destroy mosques because they have become over-adorned and not true places of worship, and he will kill the ulama, or religious scholars, because they have failed to establish a just and properly Islamic order. In every way, the appearance of the Mahdi will cause a sharp and total break with existing Islamic norms.⁶⁴

Abbas Amanat, a professor of history at Yale University and one of the leading contemporary scholars on Shi’a millenarianism explains that in Shia traditions, “the Mahdi’s revenge of Husayn’s blood will initiate an apocalyptic battle of cosmic

⁶¹ Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future*, Kindle Location 728.

⁶² Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism*, 182.

⁶³ David Cook, “Messianism in the Shiite Crescent,” *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 11 (2011): 94, https://hudson.org/content/researchattachments/attachment/1280/cook_vol11.pdf.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

proportion that precedes the Day of Resurrection and the End of Time.”⁶⁵ Sachedina contrasts the appearance of the Mahdi with the messianic beliefs of Jews and Christians:

The Christians think of a Second Coming, the Jews of one who is yet to come, while the Muslims conceive of a person who will ‘appear’ (*zuhur*) or “rise” (*qiyam*) against existing intolerable secular authority. The term “messianism” in the Islamic context is frequently used to translate the important concept of an eschatological figure, the Mahdi, who as the foreordained leader ‘will rise’ to launch a great social transformation in order to restore and adjust all things under divine guidance. The Islamic messiah, thus, embodies the aspirations of his followers in the restoration of the purity of the Faith which will bring true and uncorrupted guidance to all mankind, creating a just social order and a world free from oppression in which the Islamic revelation will be the norm for all nations.⁶⁶

Thus, the annual Ashura commemoration focuses on the Shia’s suffering and oppression, personified through the unjust martyrdom of Husayn and his family line of Imamate successors. The belief in the final imam, the Mahdi, offers hope for the eventual rule of complete justice and an end to suffering. There is a strong victimhood theme within Shia Islam. As the minority sect within Islam, they feel oppressed by the majority Sunni branch. “This is clearly evident,” as Sachedina points out, “in the condolences that the Shi’ites offer each other [during Ashura]: ‘May God grant us great rewards for our bereavement caused by the martyrdom of al-Husayn...and make us among those who will exact vengeance for his blood with His friend (*wali*) the Imam al-Mahdi.’”⁶⁷ It is not a coincidence, then, that most Shia sources cite the Day of Ashura, the 10th of Muharram, as the day when the Mahdi will appear.⁶⁸ The doctrine of Mahdism—the belief in an “Islamic messiah”—therefore, is a powerful concept and a bedrock foundation for Twelver Shi’ism in Iran.

By contrast, Sunni Muslims also believe in the Mahdi as an end-times messiah figure, although not under the same conditions and context as the Twelver Shia Muslims.

⁶⁵ Amanat, *Apocalyptic Islam and Iranian Shi’ism*, Preface, viii.

⁶⁶ Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism*, 2.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 157.

Sunni Muslims, for example, do not believe the Mahdi to be the “Twelfth Imam” in the line of direct descendants of the Prophet Mohammed. However, the Sunni tradition of the Mahdi does exhibit some parallels to Twelver Shi’ism. Shaykh Muhammad Kabbani, a Sunni scholar and Chairman of the Islamic Supreme Council of America, explains that the coming of the Mahdi is “confirmed by many authentic narrations (*hadith*)” of the Prophet Mohammed and that his arrival “must occur before Judgment Day.”⁶⁹ In his book *The Approach of Armageddon: An Islamic Perspective*, Shaykh Kabbani references the widely accepted Sahih hadith from which he quotes the prophet Mohammed: “If this world has just one day remaining Allah will extend that day until a man comes. He is from me, (or from my family). His name is like my name, (i.e., Muhhamad)...He fills the earth with equality and justice, as it has been filled with injustice and oppression.”⁷⁰

C. KHOMEINISM, THE REVOLUTION, AND THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC

Because the Shia split doctrinally with Sunnis following the death Mohammed, (and later Ali) they were despised, persecuted, and murdered by the more powerful Sunni caliphates and, in more modern times, by the Sunni and colonial regimes of the Middle East. For nearly 200 years, the Shia relied upon their divinely guided line of imams for direction and hope. Following the occultation of the Mahdi, the Shia put their faith in the *ulama*, or the Shia clergy, who became the legal and spiritual experts absent the authority of the imams—“these scholars and experts in religious law were the forerunners of today’s ayatollahs (literally, signs of God).”⁷¹ During the occultation, the Mahdi is not completely cut off from the Shia community—learned jurists can speak and act on behalf of the Imam for religious matters.⁷² The doctrine of speaking and acting on behalf of the Mahdi, therefore, becomes an important tenet of Khomeinism.

⁶⁹ Muhammad Hisham Kabbani, *The Approach of Armageddon?: An Islamic Perspective: A Chronicle of Scientific Breakthroughs and World Events That Occur During the Last Days, as Foretold by Prophet Muhammad* (Washington, DC: Islamic Supreme Council of America, 2003), 228.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Nasr, *The Shia Revival*, Kindle Locations 728–731.

⁷² Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism*, 23.

Khomeinism is best described as Ayatollah Khomeini's doctrine or theory on the establishment of an Islamic state. His theory of the *velayat-e faqih* (translated as 'the governance of the jurist') is a re-construction of Shia doctrine positing that "God's law should be enforced by religious scholars, the *fuqaha*,—those most qualified to interpret the law—until the Hidden Imam returned."⁷³ This differed from the traditional Shia governance model, which left the state—not the religious scholars—in charge of the day-to-day political affairs until the Mahdi returned to establish the perfect Islamic state.⁷⁴ Khomeini argued that the Qur'an and the *Sunna* (the life and teachings of Mohammed) "contain all the law and ordinances man needs 'to attain happiness and perfection of his state', and that the law is 'actually the ruler'...that God would not have created the law—the *shari'a*—had he not wanted to enforce it."⁷⁵ In his 1970 compilation titled, *Islamic Government*, Khomeini taught that, "in the time of the Prophet [Mohammed], laws were not merely expounded and promulgated; they were also implemented... it is for this reason that the formation of a government and the establishment of executive organs are necessary. Belief in the necessity for these is part of the general belief in the Imamate, as are, too, the exertion and struggle for the sake of establishing them."⁷⁶

1. The Context Surrounding the 1979 Islamic Revolution

Many events, people, and issues shaped the Iranian environment and narrative leading to the rise of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Perhaps the most significant pre-revolutionary event that influenced the trajectory of the country was precipitated by the United States and Great Britain in 1953. The two countries engineered a clandestine coup in 1953 to oust the democratically elected Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeq. Mossadeq's policy of nationalizing Iran's oil industry, thereby cutting off profits to the Anglo-Iranian Oil company—a British owned corporation—initiated a series of cascading events that led to a worsening relationship

⁷³ Baqer Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah* (London: IB Tauris, 1999), 153.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ruhollah Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*; Translated and Annotated by Hamid Algar, trans. Hamid Algar (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1981), 37.

between Iran and Great Britain. British intelligence enlisted the services of the Central Intelligence Agency—which was already leery of Iran pivoting toward the Soviet bloc—and the two agencies unseated Mossadeq and halted Iran’s progress toward democracy.⁷⁷ As a result, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi regained sole power as the U.S.-backed monarch and steadily pursued a path toward a secular dictatorship.

By the early 1960s, Ayatollah Khomeini, the Shia clergy, and many of the commoners became increasingly dissatisfied with the Shah’s decisions—perceived as appeasing the U.S. government—and the country’s blatant shift toward Western values and culture. Moreover, the Shah’s greed for opulence, funded by Iranian oil and Western money, and the brutal methods of the Shah’s secret police, the SAVAK, began to stir up the masses and plant the seeds of revolution. On the 10th day of Muharram (the Day of Ashura) in 1963, Khomeini delivered a historic speech that warned the Shah “not to behave in such a way that the people would rejoice when he should ultimately be forced to leave the country.”⁷⁸ The Shah arrested Khomeini a few days after this speech and, as a result, major uprisings ensued throughout Iran to protest Khomeini’s confinement. According to Hamid Algar, who translated many of Khomeini’s speeches into English, “the date on which this uprising began [June 5, 1963], marked a turning point in the modern history of Iran. It established Imam Khomeini as national leader and spokesman for popular aspirations...and introduced a period of mass political activity under the guidance of religious leadership.”⁷⁹ Khomeini was eventually released from prison and resumed his denunciations of the Shah’s regime. His influence and popularity continued to grow to the point that the Shah felt his only option to silence the popular cleric was to exile him to Turkey in 1964, and then to Iraq in 1965.⁸⁰

Khomeini found refuge in the Shi’ite holy city of Najaf, Iraq, for over a decade, where he continued to gain followers and promote his anti-West and Marxist Islamic social justice philosophy. Historically, the most important Iraqi centers of Shia Islam are

⁷⁷ Milani, *The Shah*, 152, 161.

⁷⁸ Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution*, 17.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 17–18.

Karbala and Najaf, and the most important Shia clerics lived in these two cities. By allowing Khomeini to find refuge in Najaf, the Shah unintentionally helped him become more important in the Islamic world.⁸¹ (The maps in Figure 2 provide a detailed view of the cities in Iraq and Iran).

Khomeini's thoughts and teachings from Iraq continued to influence the Iranian masses. In September 1978, Saddam Hussein obliged the Shah, by expelling Khomeini from Iraq, leaving him to look for another base of operations.⁸² He settled in Paris, France, a month later where, ironically, he had more access to media and a greater ability to publish his sermons through cassette tapes and circulars. Khomeini's influential teachings and proclamations were smuggled into Iran and, according to Algar, "his name was constantly repeated in the slogans that were devised and chanted in the demonstrations; his portrait served as a revolutionary banner; and his return from exile to supervise the installation of an Islamic government was insistently demanded."⁸³ The enormous advantage Khomeini had over secular politicians was his access to the network of mosques around Iran. He also had financial support, particularly through the Islamic taxes that practicing Shia Muslims paid to their "source of emulation" they chose to follow.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Milani, *The Shah*, 272, 406.

⁸² Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution*, 20.

⁸³ Ibid., 19.

⁸⁴ Fathali Moghaddam, *From the Terrorists' Point of View: What They Experience and Why They Come to Destroy* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006), Kindle Locations 1947–1950.



Figure 2. Maps of Iraq and Iran⁸⁵

2. The Revolution and Formation of the Islamic Republic

In 1978, civil unrest against the Shah's regime—emboldened by Khomeini's sermons—reached a crescendo toward the end of the year. With his government on the edge of collapse, the Shah left the country in January 1979, paving the way for Khomeini to return home. After spending more than 14 years in exile, Khomeini returned to Tehran in February 1979 to a throng of more than a million supporters welcoming his return.⁸⁶

A month later, in mid-February 1979, revolutionaries overthrew the remaining factions supporting the Shah and opened the door for Khomeini to implement an Islamic version of social justice as he had outlined in his books and speeches. Meanwhile, the 1979 revolution caught the rest of the world off guard. The United States' strategic ally in the region and proxy military stronghold along the Soviet Union's southwest flank was

⁸⁵ "The World Factbook," Central Intelligence Agency, accessed July 25, 2014, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>.

⁸⁶ Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution*, 22.

gone. Gary Sick, President Jimmy Carter's senior White House Aide on Iran and a member of the National Security Council, wrote, "This was the first contact between the United States and radical, political Islam. It set the tone for future dealings with Iran and other Islamic states."⁸⁷

In a March 1979 referendum, riding the momentous wave of the revolution, 98.2% of the people of Iran voted to institute an Islamic form of government.⁸⁸ Dr. Abbas Milani has noted that the Shah also had this kind of support for "elections" and "referenda" he implemented. For example, 99% endorsed his [the Shah's] 1963 'White Revolution' in a national referendum.⁸⁹ Elections and referenda in such 'democratic dictatorships' can be meaningless.⁹⁰ As Dr. Fathali Moghaddam explains in *Psychology of Dictatorship*, "context creates the springboard, and the availability of the potential dictator who takes advantage of the situation to spring to power completes the shift to or continues the dictatorship."⁹¹ So it was with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini; he completed the shift in power through the 1979 Revolution, and then laid the foundation for an Islamic government clothed as a republic, but in the end, ruled as a theocratic totalitarian regime.

3. The Iranian Constitution

*In the Name of the Almighty God
The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran*

*Article 1: The government of Iran is an Islamic Republic, which the nation of Iran based on its long-held belief in the rule of the truth and the justice of the Qu'ran, and after its victorious Islamic revolution, under the leadership of marja'-e taqlid the exalted Grand Ayatollah Imam Khomeini, has established.*⁹²

⁸⁷ Sick, "The Carter Administration."

⁸⁸ Firoozeh Papan-Matin (trans.), "The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (1989 Edition)," 162.

⁸⁹ Milani, *The Shah*, 294.

⁹⁰ Moghaddam, *The Psychology of Dictatorship*, 31–32.

⁹¹ Ibid., 53.

⁹² Firoozeh Papan-Matin (trans.), "The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (1989 Edition)," 166.

In October 1979, the people ratified a new constitution that formally abolished the monarchy and permanently enshrined an Islamic system of governance. *The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran* codifies the roles, responsibilities, and duties of the Supreme Leader, the president of Iran, as well as the judicial and legislative branches. Of note is Article 12, which declares, “The official religion of Iran is Islam and the Twelver Ja’fari school of [shi’] religion. This principle shall remain eternally unchangeable.”⁹³ While there are many schools of thought or sects within Shia Islam, this constitution specifically declares that Twelver Shi’ism—the belief in a line of 12 divinely appointed imams—is the official version of Shia Islam practiced by the state. Perhaps more important, however, for those advocating a more secular system in Iran is this pronouncement in chapter 14:

It is impossible to change the content of the articles which concern the Islamic nature of the system; establishment of all the laws and regulations on the bases of Islamic criteria and the faith and aims of the Islamic Republic of Iran; the form of the government as a republic; the sovereignty of the command [of God] and religious leadership of the community [of believers].⁹⁴

The Islamic Republic’s constitution, therefore, carefully cements the relationship between Twelver Shia Islam and the state. Short of another revolution and a complete transformation to a more secular form of governance, *The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran* ensures there will be no separation between church and state. Chapter VI offers a more thorough analysis of the Iranian constitution as a primary foundational document—a potential legal and religious tool that could propel the Iranian regime to act against the United States.

D. SIGNIFICANT EVENTS IN RECENT IRANIAN HISTORY

1. The U.S. Embassy Hostage Crisis (1979–1981)

In October 1979, U.S. President Jimmy Carter reluctantly admitted the deposed Shah to the U.S. for medical treatment—a decision that set off a chain of events that has

⁹³ Ibid., 169.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 200.

shaped the U.S.-Iranian relationship to the present day. With the 1953 British and U.S.-led coup of the Iranian government still fresh in their minds and fearing that the U.S. was plotting to overthrow the Islamic revolution, student supporters of Ayatollah Khomeini stormed the U.S. Embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979, and captured 66 Americans.⁹⁵ The students demanded the immediate return of the Shah to Iran in exchange for the hostages, but the Carter administration denied their demands. Meanwhile, the U.S. Embassy siege rallied the Iranian public behind Khomeini, helping him to ultimately dismiss Iran's provisional government led by the moderate Prime Minister Mehdi Barzagan. With Khomeini and the clerics fully in charge, the new regime defiantly held 52 Americans hostage for 444 days, releasing them the day U.S. President Ronald Reagan took office in January 1981.⁹⁶

The U.S. Embassy hostage crisis galvanized Iran's populace behind the revolution, reinforced Khomeini's power, and helped shape Iran's foreign policy toward the East and the West. According to Ray Takeyh, "the hostage crisis was designed not just to disrupt a nonexistent American coup but also to provoke a different international orientation. As such, Iran's foreign policy would not merely be an exemption from the superpower conflict but assertion of radical Islamism as the foundation of its approach to the world as well."⁹⁷ The hostage crisis has been described as the crucial "crisis incident" to cement the re-establishment of dictatorship in Iran.⁹⁸ In the wake of the 1979 hostage crisis, and the formation of an Islamic government, the U.S. and Iran severed official diplomatic relations. As a result, the subsequent relationship between the two countries has been marked by more than 30 years of animosity, distrust, and misunderstanding.

⁹⁵ Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs*, 27.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 35.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 40.

⁹⁸ Moghaddam, *The Psychology of Dictatorship*, 111, 115.

2. The Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988)

In September 1980, Iraq invaded Iran on the pretext of reclaiming land in a border area long disputed by both countries. Iraq, led by a Sunni but secular Arab government under Saddam Hussein, feared that Iran would export its revolution to the Shia in Iraq—who made up the majority of Iraq’s citizens and who had been suppressed by the Sunni-led Iraqi government. With support from the United States, Saddam calculated that the new Islamic Republic was vulnerable, still in the midst of reorganizing its government and military, and that Iraq could overwhelm Iran, overthrow the clerical regime, and gain more oil rich land for Iraq. Despite Iraq’s initial victories, the Islamic Republic countered with its own tactics—unconventional human wave martyr attacks consisting of young men following in the path of Imam Husayn, sacrificing their lives for their brand of Shia Islam and for the Islamic Republic. Depicted by the Khomeini regime as a battle between “good and evil,” thousands of young men volunteered for martyrdom and became part of the “human wave” attacks against the Iraqi Army—using their bodies to detonate land mines and assault well-fortified Iraqi gun positions and tanks.⁹⁹

The war lasted eight years, during which the human losses tallied to more than a million. It was a war between Arabs and Persians, a competition for power and land, but from a religious standpoint it was a contest of ideologies between the Sunni and Shia.¹⁰⁰ Ray Takeyh writes: “The clerics, whose revolution had succeeded against great odds, assumed that spiritual valor would compensate for Iraq’s technological edge. Military planning and issues of strategy and tactics were cast aside for the sake of martyrdom and sacrifice.”¹⁰¹ The Iran–Iraq War, therefore, becomes this study’s first example of how the Islamic Republic mobilized its masses and fought an ideological, religious war—a war which it believed was a battle between the forces of good and evil. Chapter VI examines and analyzes the Iran–Iraq war within this religious context.

⁹⁹ Nasr, *The Shia Revival*, Kindle Locations 1619–1634.

¹⁰⁰ Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution*, Kindle Location 1570.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

E. CONCLUSION

In summary, this chapter introduced the basic doctrines of Shia Islam and highlighted a few of the most important Shia narratives. It familiarized the reader to the events surrounding the Sunni-Shia split and to the injustices the Shia have carried with them—injustices which are genuinely felt and passionately re-enacted each year during the Day of Ashura commemoration. This chapter also examined Twlever Shia Islam's messianic outlook, the role of the Mahdi (the Hidden Imam) in Iran's end-times beliefs and the current Supreme Leader's place as the Hidden Imam's deputy under the current Islamic government. Khomeini's theory of *velayat-e faqih* (governance by religious scholars) was highlighted alongside his role in shaping the context surrounding the 1979 Islamic Revolution. And finally, once the revolution occurred, this chapter discussed two important events—the U.S. Embassy hostage crisis and the Iran–Iraq War—that helped solidify the Khomeini rule and make the regime what it is today under his successor, Ayatollah Khamenei.

As Moghaddam explains in *The Psychology of Dictatorship*, “the normative system regulating leader-follower relations in Khomeini's Iran has to be understood in the larger context of Shi'a Islam.”¹⁰² This concept, in short, is what this chapter set out to accomplish. Although condensed, the details from this chapter now set the stage for understanding the complexities of Iran's current regime. The next chapter analyzes the roles and functions Iran's Supreme Leader, other select government institutions, as well as contemporary issues facing Iran that are germane to this thesis.

¹⁰² Moghaddam, *The Psychology of Dictatorship*, 168.

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IV. THE CURRENT REGIME

In 1989, the Islamic Republic of Iran began to alter its course, albeit still down a familiar path, but with new challenges and new leadership. The end of the Iran–Iraq War marked an era of reconstruction and a much-needed focus on domestic issues. Most importantly, however, was the June 1989 death of Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of Iran’s Islamic government and leader of the revolution. The Assembly of Experts, the constitutional body charged with selecting the new leader, chose Ali Khamenei to replace Khomeini as Iran’s second Supreme Leader. The following chapter briefly outlines the current Iranian regime under Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. This chapter’s purpose is to give the reader a feel for the complex nature of how the Islamic Republic is governed today, and the difficulty in predicting and understanding, as an outsider, how the regime makes decisions.

In 2010, the Rand Corporation under a contract with the Office of the Secretary of Defense published a book titled, *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads*¹⁰³: *An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*. The book’s objective is to provide a “framework to help policymakers and analysts better understand existing and evolving leadership dynamics driving Iranian decisionmaking.”¹⁰⁴ Although Iran’s constitution provides the Islamic Republic a formal structure for governing, one of the primary conclusions in this book, as well as many other scholarly reports, is that Iran’s governing process relies on key personalities and factions within informal networks to get business done. The Rand book, therefore, dedicates one full chapter to understanding the complexity of Iran’s factionalism and informal networks. Beginning with the Supreme Leader at the center of “this complex web of interrelationships,” the authors assert that “it is the combination of key personalities, networks based on a number of commonalities, and institutions—not

¹⁰³ Bonyads are foundations “which function as independent economic entities and patronage networks unaccountable to the state.” The Supreme Leader appoints the bonyad directors. David E. Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads*, 25.

¹⁰⁴ Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads*, Preface.

any one of these elements alone—that defines the political system of the Islamic Republic.”¹⁰⁵

A. THE SUPREME LEADER

As a mid-level cleric appointed to the supreme leadership, Khamenei lacked the religious credentials—the title of *marja-i-taqlid* (source of emulation)—required by the constitution.¹⁰⁶ The Assembly of Experts, therefore, made him temporary Supreme Leader, and then reconfirmed him after the 1989 constitutional amendment eliminated the requirement of *marja-i-taqlid* for Supreme Leader.¹⁰⁷ Although he started his new tenure with meager religious qualifications, Ali Khamenei, by 1989, had already sharpened his political and military administrative skills. Under his predecessor, he served briefly as the minister of defense, supervisor of the Revolutionary Guards, and as a two-term president during the bulk of the Iran–Iraq War.¹⁰⁸

Thus, at the onset of his new appointment, Khamenei used his political acumen and trusted network to build the foundation of an overarching bureaucracy—the Office of the Supreme Leader—composed of his most loyal friends and trusted associates.¹⁰⁹ Mehdi Khalaji, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute and a Qom-trained Shiite theologian, explains that because Khamenei “lacked his predecessor’s charisma and religious and political credentials ... he was compelled to devise a sophisticated system in which the president’s power was inherently limited. And indeed, over time, this system has had the effect of gradually reducing the president’s power and capabilities to the benefit of the Supreme Leader.”¹¹⁰

Sadjadpour provides a concise, yet thorough statement of Ali Khamenei’s importance to Iran and to the world: “There are few leaders in the world more important

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 41.

¹⁰⁶ Farideh Farhi, “The Assembly of Experts,” *The Iran Primer*, accessed July 14, 2014, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/assembly-experts>.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Sadjadpour, “The Supreme Leader.”

¹⁰⁹ Khalaji, *Tightening the Reins: How Khamenei Makes Decisions*, 20.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 35.

to current world affairs but less understood than Ayatollah Khamenei, the supreme leader of Iran. He is the single most powerful individual in a highly factionalized, autocratic regime. No major decisions can be taken without his consent, and his top priorities are his own survival and that of the Islamic Republic.”¹¹¹

After 25 years as the Supreme Leader, Khamenei has managed to centralize his authority by staffing his office with, as Khalaji notes, “a new generation of politicians with military or security backgrounds This approach has gradually transformed the country’s top military structure—the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)—into a key player in Iranian politics and economics.”¹¹² Although Khamenei has solidified his role as the most powerful person in Iran and the regime’s key decision-maker, he should not be considered all-powerful. As noted by the Rand report, the Supreme Leader exercises “unquestioned authority over most affairs of state and society in Iran. The reality, however, is somewhat less stark. Certainly, the more central an issue—such as the nuclear program or internal security—is to the regime’s survival, the more insular the decisionmaking around Khamenei and the less room there is for others to influence the debate.”¹¹³

Many questions remain about the future of the position and Office (bureaucracy) of the Supreme Leader. Will the Assembly of Experts and/or the aging Khamenei appoint a replacement before he dies? What key personality, institution, or faction will rise to fill the leadership void before or after Khamenei’s death? While research cannot answer these questions, the following sections of this chapter describe the institutions that serve “as a backdrop or playing field for informal give and take among the individuals, networks, and factions that the Supreme Leader oversees, brokers, and, at times, engages.”¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Sadjadpour, “The Supreme Leader.”

¹¹² Khalaji, *Tightening the Reins: How Khamenei Makes Decisions*, v.

¹¹³ Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, 45–46.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 116.

B. THE GUARDIAN COUNCIL AND ASSEMBLY OF EXPERTS

The Guardian Council, as its name indicates, is a 12-member council of Islamic jurists and legal scholars charged with protecting “the commands of Islam, and the constitution from discord with the proceedings of the Islamic Consultative Assembly” (the Iranian parliament, commonly known as the *Majlis*).¹¹⁵ One of the Guardian Council’s main functions, then, is to review all legislation to ensure its compatibility with Islamic principles before the law is passed and implemented.¹¹⁶ The Guardian Council is also charged with vetting candidates and supervising the elections for the President of the Republic, the Leadership Council of Experts (the Assembly of Experts), and the Iranian Parliament (*Majlis*).¹¹⁷

The Supreme Leader appoints six Islamic jurists to serve six-year terms on the Guardian Council. The other half are appointed by the Iranian parliament “at the recommendation of the head of the judiciary, who is in turn appointed by the Supreme Leader.”¹¹⁸ Thus, the Supreme Leader and the Guardian Council “wield far more power than elected institutions like the presidency and parliament. The Guardian Council has the authority to vet all candidates for public office and disqualify any who are not deemed sufficiently loyal to the supreme leader.”¹¹⁹

The Assembly of Experts—an elected body of 86 clerics—has the unique responsibility for selecting, supervising, and removing the Supreme Leader.¹²⁰ In theory, this assembly could act as a powerful check against the Supreme Leader; however, since the Guardian Council essentially approves all candidates (Islamic jurists and scholars), the assembly’s elected members “have been vetted to exclude reformers or critics since 1991.”¹²¹ The process of voting in Iran offers the pretense of a republic, with “free and

¹¹⁵ Firoozeh Papan-Matin (trans.), “The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (1989 Edition),” 181.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 182.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, 29.

¹¹⁹ Sadjadpour, “The Supreme Leader.”

¹²⁰ Farhi, “The Assembly of Experts.”

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

fair elections.” However, it is more likely that the function of voting in Iran aligns more with instructions found in *The Dictator’s Handbook*—that “rigged elections are a warning to powerful politicians that they are expendable if they deviate from the leader’s desired path.”¹²²

C. THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTIONARY GUARD CORPS

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) reports directly to the Supreme Leader and is the most powerful military and security organization in Iran—responsible for protecting the regime and the principles of the Islamic revolution at home and abroad.¹²³ During the eight-year Iran–Iraq War, Ayatollah Khomeini built the IRGC into a parallel armed forces structure—providing the regime with a loyal army, navy, and air guard corps—in addition to the less trusted regular Iranian armed forces (the *Artesh*) that carried over from the Shah’s military.¹²⁴ According to a 2014 Jane’s security assessment, “the IRGC is composed of five main branches: Ground Forces, Air Force, Navy, Basij militia, and the Qods Force special operations branch.”¹²⁵

Following the Iran–Iraq War, the IRGC gained a strong economic foothold in Iran by engaging in post-war reconstruction activities. More recently, the Guards have “benefitted from international sanctions and Iran’s isolation...The IRGC’s ability to tap into state funds and its relatively vast independent resources have provided a decisive advantage. Under Ahmadinejad, the Guards have been awarded hundreds of no-bid government contracts in addition to billions of dollars in loans for construction, infrastructure and energy projects.”¹²⁶

Alireza Nader, an Iran expert at the Rand Corporation, suggests that “Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guards have formed a symbiotic

¹²² Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, *The Dictator’s Handbook: Why Bad Behavior Is Almost Always Good Politics*, 1st ed. (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), 61.

¹²³ Nader, “The Revolutionary Guards.”

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ IHS Jane’s, *Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment - Iran*, January 29, 2014, 10, <https://janes.ihs.com.libproxy.nps.edu/CustomPages/Janes/JMSAHome.aspx?Category=JMSA&Tab=SECURITYCOUNTRYRISK&Country=Iran>.

¹²⁶ Nader, “The Revolutionary Guards.”

relationship that buttresses the supreme leader's authority and preserves the status quo."¹²⁷ On the other hand, Nader also explains that the IRGC "faces internal divisions which could potentially weaken Khamenei's hand in a moment of crisis."¹²⁸ The IRGC could therefore play a significant role in selecting a new Supreme Leader once Khamenei dies. The Rand report speculates that "if the Guards continue to gain political power, they could begin to see themselves as kingmakers and demand more from the Supreme Leader and the clerics. Or, the IRGC may...make a bid for power in the next several years, possibly even challenging the Assembly of Experts in selecting the next Supreme Leader."¹²⁹

1. The IRGC Qods Force

The Qods force is the IRGC's elite external operations unit numbering about 5,000 strong.¹³⁰ According to a September 2013 report from the Center for a New American Security (CNAS), the Qods Force mission is remarkably broad, suggesting the unit has missions similar to the Central Intelligence Agency, Special Forces, and the State Department rolled into one.¹³¹ The report's authors, Scott Modell and David Asher, list the following Qods Force primary missions:

- Conduct covert action and tactical intelligence collection, with operations designed to organize, train, equip, and finance Islamic movements and pro-Iran militants around the world;
- Direct and support assassinations, mainly against Western and Israeli targets;
- Conduct covert diplomacy;
- Lead the planning and forward deployment of IRGC forces as the central piece of Iran's asymmetrical warfare doctrine;

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, 121.

¹³⁰ Nader, "The Revolutionary Guards."

¹³¹ Scott Modell and David Asher, *Pushback: Countering the Iran Action Network* (Center for a New American Security (CNAS), September 5, 2013), 9, <http://www.cnas.org/publications/pushback-countering-iran-action-network>.

- Engage in covert influence and spread the resistance via cultural, social, economic, political, and business entities and organizations; and
- Build a global commercial apparatus designed to acquire new technologies, assist with government covert action programs, create new sources of revenue and add to existing threat facilitation networks.¹³²

In its most recent annual “Country Reports on Terrorism,” the U.S. Department of State concluded that, since 2012, the U.S. has “seen a resurgence of activity by Iran’s Revolutionary Guards Corps’ Qods Force (IRGC-QF) the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), and Tehran’s ally Hizballah.”¹³³ The Qods force is believed to be behind the 2011 plot to assassinate the Saudi Ambassador to the U.S. via a mass casualty attack in Washington , DC.¹³⁴

A 2014 Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment on Iran concludes that since Iran’s conventional military “is no match for U.S. or Israeli power, Iran is considered to be strong in its asymmetric, irregular, and proxy warfare capability...the IRGC and its Qods elite Force have been successful in its covert or open operations overseas on many occasions.”¹³⁵ Furthermore, the same Jane’s report explains that Iran’s doctrine of “asymmetric warfare” is designed to counter threats “from a much larger and more powerful adversary” and, as demonstrated in the 2004 Ashura-5 military exercise, “seeks to identify and exploit Iranian military advantages in any war with a foreign power.”¹³⁶

2. The Basij Militia

The Basij militia is one of the five main IRGC branches specifically tasked to preserve internal security and protect the Islamic Republic against foreign

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ “Country Reports on Terrorism 2013 Fact Sheet,” U.S. Department of State, (April 30, 2014), <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/04/225406.htm>.

¹³⁴ U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Subcommittee Hearing: Hezbollah’s Strategic Shift: A Global Terrorist Threat*, 2013, 11, <http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/hearing/subcommittee-hearing-hezbollah%E2%80%99s-strategic-shift-global-terrorist-threat>.

¹³⁵ IHS Jane’s, *Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment - Iran*, 9.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 91.

intervention.¹³⁷ According to Jane's, the Basij force has an estimated active strength of 90,000 paramilitary volunteers and a probable mobilization capacity of 1.5 million.¹³⁸ The Basijis are essentially “the eyes and ears of the Islamic regime and are considered extremely loyal.”¹³⁹ They are well known for their sometimes-brutal tactics in enforcing Islamic law, dress, and customs in Iran and they are rewarded with financial and material incentives for their loyalty and service.¹⁴⁰

Ali Alfoneh, an IRGC expert and researcher at the American Enterprise Institute, explains that the neighborhood mosque functions as Basij headquarters and, according to the Basij statute, “members are selected or recruited under the supervision of ‘clergy of the neighborhoods.’”¹⁴¹ Iran claims to have 70,000 Basij bases throughout the country, which includes elements of the Pupil Basij (ages 12 to 18), the University Basij, and the Tribal and Public Basij units.¹⁴² The primary goal of the Pupil Basij, for example, is not so much to prepare the young student for paramilitary training, as it is “to reinforce support for the regime through ideological dissemination.”¹⁴³

3. Hezbollah

Hezbollah, translated as “Party of God,” emerged in the mid-1980s as a Lebanese-based resistance movement against Israel’s invasion of Lebanon. The organization has since grown to become a strong military force, a Shia terrorist group—backed by Iran and the Assad regime in Syria—and a powerful political party in Lebanon. In 1983, Hezbollah targeted the U.S. embassy and Marine barracks in Beirut, Lebanon killing nearly 300 Americans and Lebanese in two separate vehicle bomb attacks. Before the

¹³⁷ Ibid., 7.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 6.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, 63.

¹⁴¹ Ali Alfoneh, “The Basij Resistance Force,” *The Iran Primer*, accessed June 26, 2014, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/basij-resistance-force>.

¹⁴² IHS Jane’s, *Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment - Iran*, 7.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

September 11, 2001, al-Qaeda terrorist attacks, Hezbollah had killed more Americans than any other terrorist group.¹⁴⁴

Iran's IRGC Qods Force was the driving force that created, funded, and trained Hezbollah in Lebanon. Notably, the Qods Force continues to have a controlling interest in Hezbollah to this day.¹⁴⁵ Referring to Iran, the Qods Force, and Hezbollah, a senior U.S. government official testified to Congress that, "It is important to realize that where you find one—you find the other. The Qods Force was responsible for standing-up Hezbollah, and has leveraged and exploited the intimate relationship those groups share on countless occasions over the years."¹⁴⁶

In the 2013 CNAS report, authors Scott Modell and David Asher define the Iran Action Network as three key organizations: the IRGC Qods Force, the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), and Lebanese Hezbollah.¹⁴⁷ According to the report, these organizations are "involved in crafting and implementing the covert elements of Iran's foreign policy agenda, from terrorism, political, economic, and social subversion; to illicit finance, weapons, and narcotics trafficking."¹⁴⁸

D. THE PRESIDENT

The 1989 constitutional revision abolished the position of prime minister, giving the office of President of the Islamic Republic more power and influence—a development that has, at times, conflicted with the Supreme Leader's authority. Each elected president since 1989 has, despite being overshadowed by Khamenei, "put his own distinct mark on the country."¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁴ U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on International Relations, *Hezbollah's Global Reach*, 2006, 1, <http://democrats.foreignaffairs.house.gov/archives/109/30143.pdf>.

¹⁴⁵ U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Subcommittee Hearing: Hezbollah's Strategic Shift: A Global Terrorist Threat*, 10.

¹⁴⁶ U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Homeland Security, *Iran, Hezbollah, and the Threat to the Homeland*, 2012, 19, <http://homeland.house.gov/hearing/hearing-iran-hezbollah-and-threat-homeland>.

¹⁴⁷ Modell and Asher, *Pushback: Countering the Iran Action Network*, 5.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Shaul Bakhash, "The Six Presidents," *The Iran Primer*, accessed July 14, 2014, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/six-presidents>.

Iran's fourth president, Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989–1997), for example, focused on rebuilding the post-war economy and advanced a pragmatic social and foreign agenda. During his second term, however, “he lost the initiative to the Supreme Leader and conservatives.”¹⁵⁰ Iran's reformist president, Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005), endeavored to open a dialogue with the outside world and advance a liberal political agenda, but his efforts were thwarted by Khamenei's office and by opposition from hardliners.¹⁵¹

On the other hand, Khamenei's support of a relatively obscure candidate, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–2013), enabled him to win the presidency in 2005 and again in the disputed 2009 elections. Following the 2009 elections, up to three million frustrated, but peaceful, protestors—calling themselves the Green Movement—took to the street to complain that the election results were manipulated in favor of Ahmadinejad when his popular opponent, former Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi, was projected to win.¹⁵² The Green Movement's post-election day demonstration caught the regime off guard, resulting in the deployment of IRGC and Basij units. The paramilitary forces employed harsh tactics as “thousands of protesters were beaten, hundreds were arrested and dozens were killed by snipers.”¹⁵³ The crack down on peaceful demonstrators, according to Mehdi Khalaji, “harmed both Khamenei's personal image and that of the Islamic Republic...leading many Muslims throughout the world to question the regime's religious legitimacy. Moreover, Khamenei's subsequent efforts to control Ahmadinejad effectively forced him to discredit the same person he wanted to keep in power in 2009.”¹⁵⁴ Khamenei ultimately withdrew his support from Ahmadinejad when the latter began to exert presidential independence from the IRGC and Supreme Leader in an attempt to expand his own sphere of political and economic influence.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Abbas Milani, “The Green Movement,” *The Iran Primer*, accessed June 29, 2014, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/green-movement>.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Khalaji, *Tightening the Reins: How Khamenei Makes Decisions*, vii.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

Ahmadinejad's often hostile and aggressive posture towards Israel and the United States put him in the spotlight of the international news media—especially with his outspoken denial of the Holocaust.¹⁵⁶ As a populist president, he served in stark contrast to that of his reformist-minded predecessor Muhammad Khatami. Instead of seeking a rapprochement with the West, “he challenged America’s international dominance and... pushed ahead with its [Iran’s] nuclear fuel enrichment program, despite new United Nations and U.S. sanctions between 2006 and 2010.”¹⁵⁷ And many of Ahmadinejad’s U.N. General Assembly speeches call for the hastening of the return of al-Mahdi, the Twelfth Imam. The next two chapters will discuss Ahmadinejad’s messianic inclinations in more detail as they relate to this thesis.

In June 2013, Hassan Rouhani succeeded Ahmadinejad as Iran’s new president. Many outsiders have been speculating how Iran might change under Rouhani’s leadership. Suzanne Maloney, an Iranian expert from the Brookings Institution, described Rouhani as “a blunt pragmatist with plenty of experience maneuvering within Iran’s theocratic system... He embraced reformist rhetoric during the campaign, but will not deviate too far from the system’s principles, the foremost of which is the primacy of the Supreme Leader.”¹⁵⁸ Moreover, Khalaji notes that “Rouhani has sought common ground with the Supreme Leader on issues such as reducing the IRGC’s role in the country’s economy. The Supreme Leader, in turn, has been generally supportive of Rouhani’s efforts in the nuclear talks with the West.”¹⁵⁹ Figure 3 illustrates the relationships and connections within Iran’s Power structure.

¹⁵⁶ Bakhsh, “The Six Presidents.”

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Suzanne Maloney, “Why Rouhani Won -- And Why Khamenei Let Him,” *Foreign Affairs*, June 16, 2013, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139511/suzanne-maloney/why-rouhani-won-and-why-khamenei-let-him>.

¹⁵⁹ Khalaji, *Tightening the Reins: How Khamenei Makes Decisions*, vii.

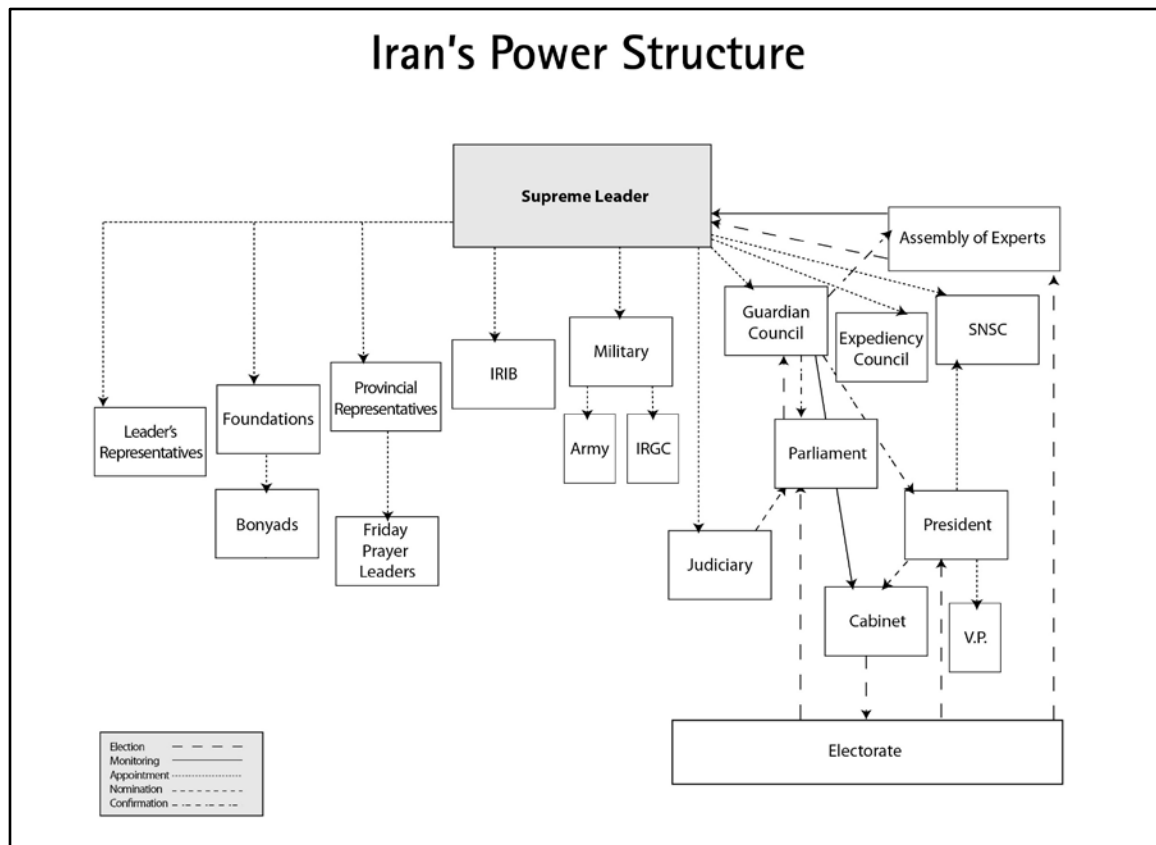


Figure 3. Iran's Power Structure.¹⁶⁰

E. FOREIGN POLICY AND RELIGION

Due to changing international context since the 1979 revolution and Iran's subsequent isolation from the West, its foreign policy has naturally gravitated toward Russia and China to the East. For example, the demise of the Soviet Union coincided with the death of Khomeini and the rise of a more pragmatic regime under then president Hashemi Rafsanjani—a leader who was “willing to take advantage of opportunities that the dogmatic Khomeini might have missed.”¹⁶¹ As Rafsanjani opened the doors of dialogue with the new Russian Federation following the Iran–Iraq War, he certainly did so with the new Supreme Leader's blessing. As Takeyh notes, “even Khamenei and the conservatives understood that Iran's need for trade and diplomatic assistance made the

¹⁶⁰ Mehrzad Boroujerdi and Kourosh Rahimkhani, “Iran's Power Structure,” *The Iran Primer*, accessed October 6, 2013, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/irans-power-structure>.

¹⁶¹ Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs*, 151.

preservation of the Russian card a strategic necessity.”¹⁶² As a result of this rapprochement with Moscow, Iran received nuclear technology from Russia and, in return, Moscow received much-needed funds.¹⁶³ Thus, due to Russia’s “more charitable assessment of Iran’s intentions, its ample commercial incentives, and its desire to defy the United States,” the relationship between Moscow and Tehran has remained relatively strong to this day.¹⁶⁴

Moreover, since the 1979 revolution, “Iran’s relations with China also flourished more than those of any other country partly because they were uncomplicated by issues of terrorism and human rights.”¹⁶⁵ In the 1990s, for example, Iran signed numerous contracts with China for weapons and nuclear technology, in exchange for oil payments to a China “who was growing ever more dependent on Middle Eastern energy supplies.”¹⁶⁶ Iran, however, largely ignored the plight of repressed Chinese Muslims in order to complete its deals with Beijing.¹⁶⁷

On the other hand, as opportunities emerged for some European Union countries and Persian Gulf states to develop relations with Iran, the Islamic Republic found it difficult to overlook its religious ideology—as it had done with Russia and China—in exchange for mutually beneficial relations. “For many within the theocratic state,” Takeyh explains, “Iran’s charge remained the redemption of Khomeini’s Islamist mission. In terms of its approach to Western Europe and the Persian Gulf region, Iran could not divest itself from its radical heritage.”¹⁶⁸ Thus, Iran has chosen a more pragmatic approach with Russia and China, which, along with Iran, are “concerned about the evolving nature of the post-cold war international order and the prospects of a menacing American hegemony.”¹⁶⁹ It can be deduced then, that future openings for the

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 157.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 160.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

West to work with Iran will likely be met with a larger dose of religious ideology than pragmatism. Furthermore, the present situation in Syria and Israel, involving Iran's allies Hezbollah and Hamas respectively is causing Iran and, by default its proxies, to become more isolated from not only the West, but also the Islamic world.¹⁷⁰ As a result, Iran will continue to become more reliant on Russia and China.

F. INTERNAL AFFAIRS AND RELIGION

According to Jane's, Iran's domestic policies with regard to religion can be divided into three main positions: "hardliners who regard civil society as antithetical to the basic values of the Islamic Republic; those who want to Islamicise civil society and make it more palatable to their interpretation of Iran's ideological beliefs and values; and those who view civil society positively, as useful in structuring state-society relations and promoting democracy and pluralism."¹⁷¹ While Rouhani has encouraged a move toward liberalizing some of the regime's policies, according to *Jane's*, he will likely prioritize "appeasing the more powerful conservative factions than the reformists."¹⁷² Popular opposition to the regime is believed to be strong, as evidenced by Green Movement protests following the 2009 presidential election; however, the regime's often brutal efforts to suppress opposition movements severely limits their ability to flourish and challenge the status quo.¹⁷³

The regime feels threatened by liberalism and "liberal" thinking, especially in urban areas where the population is more educated and exposed to liberal ideas.¹⁷⁴ In particular, the rise of women in higher education and the incursion of "Western ideas" about the role of women have alarmed the hardliner and reformist factions alike.¹⁷⁵ As a result, the regime has attempted to limit entry of women to universities and to promote

¹⁷⁰ Moghaddam, Online Discussion, August 8, 2014.

¹⁷¹ IHS Jane's, *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment - Iran*, Article #4, Page 7 of 9.

¹⁷² Ibid., Article #4 Page 4 of 9.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Fathali Moghaddam, Online Discussion, CHDS Thesis Center Forum, July 22, 2014.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

the woman's role in the home—as a mother, bearing and raising multiple children.¹⁷⁶ Recently, the regime has rescinded its free birth control program in an effort to essentially double its population from 80 million to 150 or 200 million.¹⁷⁷

On May 20, 2014, the Supreme Leader announced 14 general policies to boost Iran's population, charging government institutions to adopt essential measures “in a careful, rapid and powerful way.”¹⁷⁸ Khamenei's general policies on population include: “promoting the formation of family and giving birth to more children, encouraging youth to marry at a younger age... and enabling them to afford the cost of living and to raise righteous and competent children.”¹⁷⁹ The more religious aspects of Khamenei's population growth policy include: “promoting and establishing an Islamic-Iranian lifestyle and confronting the negative aspects of western lifestyle...[and] strengthening the factors (Iranian, Islamic and revolutionary) which bring about national identity.”¹⁸⁰ Notably, Khamenei focuses on promoting a stronger Islamic and Iranian national identity to resist the outgroup Western way of life. As Moghaddam points out, “the significance of threats to collective identity become clear when one considers situations in which *sacred carriers* representing the ingroup are threatened.”¹⁸¹ For example, the Islamic *hejab* (veil), as a sacred carrier, symbolizes the ingroup's adherence to Islamic principles and also “the control of women in the public sphere.”¹⁸² Women in Iran who embrace “Western values” and “liberal thinking,” therefore, become a target of displaced aggression by fundamentalist men who “try to drive women out of the public sphere and back into the home.”¹⁸³

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Al Arabiya, “Iran Gives Up Birth Control Program to Boost Population,” accessed August 29, 2014, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/08/03/230144.html>.

¹⁷⁸ Ali Khamenei, “Supreme Leader Announces General Policies on Population,” May 20, 2014, http://english.khamenei.ir/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1911&Itemid=16.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Moghaddam, *The Psychology of Dictatorship*, 73.

¹⁸² Ibid., 179.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 109.

The regime's effort to boost population growth by limiting access to birth control, and even (as of this writing) considering the criminalization of permanent methods of contraception, can also be seen as a move to strengthen internal security.¹⁸⁴ A larger population will not only strengthen Iran's manpower, it will also relegate women to the more traditional role of motherhood—so, in theory, there would be fewer “liberal women” causing problems for the regime.¹⁸⁵ In *The Psychology of Dictatorship*, Moghaddam explains that in dictatorships, “there is a return to the need for women to have large numbers of offspring... Above all, dictatorships have manufactured an ideal of womanhood that centers on sacrifice and the unique ability of women to sacrifice for others, with special emphasis on national sacrifice.”¹⁸⁶

G. OTHER IMPORTANT ISSUES

The Supreme Leader and IRGC retain control over Iran's most lethal weapons systems as well as Iran's economic lifeline—the oil and gas industry. During the time of this writing, Iran, the United States and the other “P5+1” nations are engaged in Iranian nuclear enrichment negotiations in exchange for possible Iran sanctions relief. To complicate matters, Israel has threatened a pre-emptive attack against Iran's nuclear facilities if Iran were allowed to continue enrichment with the capability of developing of a nuclear weapon. Thus, the stakes are high for Iran, the international community, and the stability of the Middle East. Beginning with Iran's oil and gas reserves, the following paragraphs briefly touch on these two important issues.

1. Oil and Gas Reserves

Iran's oil and gas reserves are perhaps its greatest asset and, at the same time, its greatest economic crutch. Iran is the fifth largest oil producer in the world and has the second largest natural gas reserves, second only to the Russian Federation.¹⁸⁷ According

¹⁸⁴ Moghaddam, Online Discussion, July 22, 2014.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Moghaddam, *The Psychology of Dictatorship*, 138.

¹⁸⁷ Fareed Mohamedi, “The Oil and Gas Industry,” *The Iran Primer*, accessed July 16, 2014, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/oil-and-gas-industry>.

to Fareed Mohamedi, a partner at PFC Energy, a Washington, DC-based oil and gas consultancy, “Iran’s oil and gas sectors have critical structural problems. Subsidized prices and a population that has doubled since the 1979 revolution have created excessive demand. Supply has been stymied by underinvestment caused by financial constraints, technical shortages and sanctions.”¹⁸⁸ The most egregious problem, however, is the misuse of gas and oil revenues, which are siphoned through IRGC-controlled companies.¹⁸⁹

With regard to Iran’s dependence upon, and control over its abundant oil and gas reserves, Dr. Moghaddam poses perhaps the most relevant question, and also provides a logical answer: “How long can the dictatorships of the Near and Middle East continue? One answer is that they can continue as long as the oil reserves last. With oil revenues at their disposal, the local dictators can support huge security systems to stifle dissent at home, and gain the support of foreign powers by assuring stability and payment for lucrative arms sales and other imports.”¹⁹⁰

Therefore, as long as the Iranian elites are profiting from oil revenues, and perhaps more so because of the sanctions, it is likely the Islamic Republic will continue down the same path—provided oil prices do not drop. Mohamedi predicts that “falling oil and gas output and lower oil prices will weaken the government’s ability to stimulate the economy, which could result in slower economic growth and higher unemployment.”¹⁹¹ Furthermore, if the nuclear talks end without an agreement, international sanctions will likely slow investments in oil and gas—leading to lower output and a worsening economy.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Moghaddam, *From the Terrorists’ Point of View: What They Experience and Why They Come to Destroy*, Kindle Locations 1116–1121.

¹⁹¹ Mohamedi, “The Oil and Gas Industry.”

¹⁹² Ibid.

2. The Nuclear Issue

The deliberative body responsible for “designing Iran’s defense and security policies and responding to internal and external threats” is the small, but high-level Supreme National Security Council (SNSC).¹⁹³ On September 10, 2013, Iran’s Foreign Minister Mohammad Zarif announced to the press that “the policies and decisions on [the] nuclear issue will be made in the Supreme National Security Council” (as quoted by Mehdi Khalaji from an article in Farsi).¹⁹⁴ Although the president is the head of SNSC, Khamenei appoints the secretary and, according to Khalaji, “the council [SNSC] has no agenda independent from the will and policies of the Supreme Leader, who is represented usually by the council’s secretary—whose role prevails over that of the president.”¹⁹⁵

Although Rouhani brings extensive experience to the SNSC—as Iran’s former chief nuclear negotiator during the Khatami administration—he is, therefore, only the nominal chair of the council. Khamenei took over the nuclear portfolio in 2005, and his appointee, the SNSC secretary, is charged with leading nuclear negotiations, “reporting directly to the Supreme Leader, and briefing the president at random.”¹⁹⁶ Hence, by monitoring Khamenei’s statements and general attitude toward the negotiations, Western analysts might produce a more accurate assessment of Iran’s stance in the talks than by any other analysis offered by the media. One must assume that the SNSC’s guidance to the negotiators will ultimately conform to the Supreme Leader’s will.

Putting the current round of negotiations aside, the real concern to the U.S. and Israel, is the long held assumption that Iran—through its uranium enrichment program—will develop a nuclear weapons program. And a nuclear-armed Iran would significantly change the balance of Sunni and Shia power in the Middle East, and pose a direct threat to Israel’s existence.

¹⁹³ Khalaji, *Tightening the Reins: How Khamenei Makes Decisions*, viii.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 37, 45.

During his October 1, 2013, speech to the United Nations General Assembly, Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu threatened to take unilateral action to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. “He fooled the world once. Now he thinks he can fool it again. You see, Rohani [sic] thinks he can have his yellow cake and eat it too,” remarked Netanyahu, further stating that a nuclear armed Iran would be 50 times more dangerous than a nuclear North Korea.¹⁹⁷ In response, Iran denied seeking nuclear weapons and warned Netanyahu against making a “miscalculation.”¹⁹⁸

On the other hand, the IRGC leadership believes that it will be the United States, Israel’s patron, who will be the impetus behind any Israeli pre-emptive strike against Iran. In 2012, General Amir Ali Hajizadeh, head of the IRGC aerospace branch, threatened to target the U.S. if Israel attacks Iran’s nuclear facilities. “For this reason,” Hajizadeh stated, “we will enter a confrontation with both parties and will definitely be at war with American bases should a war break out.”¹⁹⁹

The ultimate dilemma the United States and Israel must address, then, is that of Iran as a nuclear state, and how Hezbollah as Iran’s client might play into a challenge and response nuclear scenario. In recent congressional testimony, Mr. Will Fulton, an Iranian analyst with the American Enterprise Institute, explained, “Iran is first and foremost concerned with regime preservation... Iran’s leaders have crafted a national security policy designed to protect the regime from external threats by demonstrating a capability to strike U.S. and Israeli interests anywhere in the world.”²⁰⁰ With this in mind, potential answers to this project’s research question—whether Iran’s religious beliefs could influence its strategic plans for war—are examined and analyzed in the next two chapters.

¹⁹⁷ “Netanyahu Threatens Unilateral Action Against Iran,” *Al Akhbar English*, accessed March 15, 2014, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/netanyahu-threatens-unilateral-action-against-iran>.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁹ Associated Press, “Iran: If Attacked by Israel, We’ll Target U.S.,” accessed April 17, 2014, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/iran-if-attacked-by-israel-well-target-us/>.

²⁰⁰ U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Homeland Security, “Subcommittee Hearing: Hezbollah’s Strategic Shift: A Global Terrorist Threat,” March 20, 2013, p. 10.

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V. FINDINGS

The previous two chapters have introduced the reader to the basics of Shia Islam, outlined the events surrounding the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and examined Iran's current power structure. This essential knowledge, therefore, critically serves as the context for the remainder of this thesis. The next two chapters move this thesis forward in a more research-oriented direction with this chapter discussing the research findings, and chapter VI interpreting and analyzing the findings.

The following paragraphs present two interconnected sets of findings. First, through a grounded theory process of coding and analyzing mostly primary source data, several themes or categories emerged. These categories were examined for patterns and connections and then synthesized into three religious narratives. The narratives serve as the backdrop or context for the sacred carriers and religious tools the Iranian regime could use to mobilize or launch attacks against U.S. interests at home or abroad (discussed in the next chapter).

A. PRIMARY SOURCES AND EMERGING CATEGORIES

As mentioned in the introduction chapter, grounded theories are drawn from data that "are likely to offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action."²⁰¹ The data used to identify and capture the most relevant insights, therefore, come from the writings, speeches and works of Iran's most influential and contemporary leaders. Unrelated categories and topics surfaced, but were discarded unless they connected in some way to the scope of this project.

1. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini—First Supreme Leader of Iran (1979–1989)

The book *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, translated and annotated by Hamid Algar in 1981, became this project's primary source for analyzing Ayatollah Khomeini's major writings, speeches and interviews before,

²⁰¹ Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research*, 12.

during, and immediately following the 1979 revolution. The major work examined in this compilation was Khomeini's treatise titled *Islamic Government* in which he presents his case and evidence for instituting an Islamic government on Earth. Additional writings, speeches and interviews from Khomeini were also analyzed with the goal of looking for emerging themes and concepts.

The major categories emerging from Khomeini's written thoughts, therefore, revolve around the following: a) abolishing the evils of **monarchy, moral decay, and corruption**; b) eliminating and fighting against foreign **oppression and imperialism**; c) guarding against **conspiracies** that threaten Islam; d) the theme of **justice** and establishment of **Sharia Islamic law**; and e) the importance of **sacrifice** and **martyrdom** for Islam. Other categories include derogatory, anti-West sentiments against America, capitalism, and themes of enmity toward Israel, Jews, and Zionism.

2. The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran

The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran establishes an Islamic government and codifies the roles, responsibilities, and duties of the Supreme Leader, the president of Iran, and the judicial and legislative branches. Beyond serving its intended purpose—establishing the foundational laws and government for the Islamic Republic—the categories observed in this document are primarily twofold falling along the lines of: a) **duties and responsibilities** of the clergy, the elected government, and Muslim citizens; and b) **safeguarding the revolution** and the Islamic nature of the government. The constitution calls for an “An Ideological Army” (the regular Army and the IRGC) to defend Iran's borders and protect the “weight of the ideological mission.”²⁰²

3. Ayatollah Ali Hosseini Khamenei—Second Supreme Leader of Iran (1989–Present)

The primary source highlighting the works of the current Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khamenei, is his English language website found at <http://english.khamenei.ir>. The website, The Center for Preserving and Publishing the Works of Grand Ayatollah

²⁰² Firoozeh Papan-Matin (trans.), “The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (1989 Edition),” 164.

Sayyid Ali Khamenei, functions as a well-organized library containing the Supreme Leader's current and archived speeches, messages and letters, teachings, and viewpoints on numerous topics. The "viewpoints" section, for example, highlights Khamenei's thoughts and teachings regarding specific topics ranging from religion and history, to world issues, as well as his viewpoints on the Islamic Republic. In addition to his English website, Khamenei also uses social media to shape his narrative. As of June 2014, Khamenei's English Twitter account (@khamenei_ir) claims more than 57,000 followers and, along with other social media platforms, is used to promote the Islamic Republic and denounce the United States and Israel.²⁰³ Although Twitter, Facebook and other social media are filtered and not available to the vast majority of Iranians, Khamenei's Twitter followers likely live outside Iran or are the hardline trusted loyalists who are given access.

The major categories emerging from Ayatollah Khamenei's works are, in essence, variations of the same themes as his predecessor: a) the necessity to **safeguard the Islamic revolution** through **sacrifice** and adherence to Islamic law; b) a consistent **anti-Zionism** message; and c) guarding against **Western conspiracies** and **eliminating foreign oppression**. "Khamenei has always been critical of liberal democracy and thinks that capitalism and the West are in inevitable long-term decline," writes Akbar Ganji in a *Foreign Affairs* article.²⁰⁴ Khamenei's primary concerns with the United States seem to emanate around what he believes are America's imperialist and oppressive tendencies. As Ganji notes, Khamenei "sees Washington as inherently Islamophobic" and "he believes that the U.S. government is bent on regime change in Iran, whether through internal collapse, democratic revolution, economic pressure, or military invasion."²⁰⁵ On February 25, 2014, for example, Khamenei's office evoked the memory of the 1953 U.S.-led coup of Iran's democratically elected government and broadcasted the following message via Twitter: "Since 1945, 40 independent governments, elected by the people,

²⁰³ Ali Khamenei, "Khamenei.ir (khamenei_ir) on Twitter," accessed June 13, 2014, https://twitter.com/khamenei_ir.

²⁰⁴ Akbar Ganji, "Who Is Ali Khamenei?," *Foreign Affairs*, September 1, 2013, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139643/akbar-ganji/who-is-ali-khamenei>.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

have been toppled by the U.S. Government. This is the definition of arrogance.”²⁰⁶ The accompanying infographic is shown in Figure 4. Hence, the themes of Western conspiracies and oppression are interwoven into many of his speeches and writings.



Figure 4. Khamenei Tweet: “40 Independent Governments Toppled by the U.S. Government”

²⁰⁶ https://twitter.com/khamenei_ir/status/438227942317895680, February 25, 2014.

4. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—Sixth President of Iran (2005–2013)

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the sixth president of Iran and former mayor of Tehran, is well known for his uniquely bold and religiously themed speeches at the annual United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) and for his controversial 2005 speech calling for Israel to be “wiped off the map.” Ahmadinejad served two terms as president of Iran and, while he had his differences with Supreme Leader Khamenei, he represents a principlist faction of hardline conservative politicians, IRGC members, and clerics who remain “steadfast to the revolution’s ideals.”²⁰⁷ During his terms in office, Ahmadinejad remained deeply suspicious and defiant against the United States, Israel, and the West. Ahmadinejad’s thoughts and statements, therefore, need to be analyzed and understood in the context of this research project.

The comment about Israel being “wiped off the map,” for example, seems to have been mistranslated. In a 2006 *Guardian* article, Jonathan Steele explains that Ahmadinejad’s statement should have been translated as “the regime occupying Jerusalem must vanish from the page of time”—a translation endorsed by the respected University of Michigan Professor Juan Cole. Steele speculates that the meaning of Ahmadinejad’s comment about Israel was more along the lines of Israel being “eliminated from the page of history” or “eliminated from the map of the world,” which is very different than Israel being “wiped off the map.”²⁰⁸ What is clear, however, is that Ahmadinejad’s **anti-Israel** and **anti-Zionist** sentiments represent major themes in his speeches.

Other major themes or categories include Ahmadinejad’s strong belief in the pending appearance of the Hidden Imam, **al-Mahdi**, as one who will solve the world’s problems and bring justice and peace to mankind. Many of Ahmadinejad’s UNGA speeches refer to or call for the hastening of the return of al-Mahdi. Other major themes from his UNGA speeches include his strong aversion to the **superpowers** (America being the principal superpower) and his belief in their hegemonic ambitions to subjugate the

²⁰⁷ Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, 70.

²⁰⁸ Jonathan Steele, “Lost in Translation,” *The Guardian*, June 14, 2006, sec. Comment is free, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2006/jun/14/post155>.

world. Ahmadinejad attacks **capitalism** for its greediness and inefficiencies, and the themes of **justice, rights, and equality** are highlighted as important topics in his speeches.

5. Hassan Rouhani—Seventh President of Iran (2013–Present)

At the time of this writing, Hassan Rouhani, has been in office nearly one year. Consequently, the data sample of relevant primary sources is far less than his immediate predecessor. The following primary sources, therefore, were examined for emergent categories relevant to this project: Rouhani’s 2013 UNGA speech; speeches and quotes from the Islamic Republic of Iran’s Presidency—English website; and Hassan Rouhani’s Twitter feed @HassanRouhani.

It is clear that Rouhani’s objectives, at least during the first year of his presidency, revolve around rapprochement with the West and the international community—a stark contrast to the approach of his predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. One could argue that Rouhani, a political moderate who ran on the promise to improve the economy, is presenting a friendlier attitude toward the West to open doors for international sanctions relief which would help to boost Iran’s economy. Three months after his presidency began, Rouhani wrote an op-ed in the *Washington Post* explaining that “I’m committed to fulfilling my promises to my people, including my pledge to engage in constructive interaction with the world.”²⁰⁹ Indeed, Rouhani’s foreign policy strategy aligns more closely with Mohammad Khatami, Iran’s fifth president. Khatami, in a CNN interview, for example, “called for a dialogue between the Iranian and the American people, a possible prelude to government talks.”²¹⁰

Rouhani’s narrative, therefore, does not include the same genre of bitterness toward the West and Israel. The prominent categories emerging from Rouhani’s speeches and interviews include: the recognition of **Iran’s rights for autonomy** (especially the

²⁰⁹ Hassan Rouhani, “President of Iran Hassan Rouhani: Time to Engage,” *The Washington Post*, September 19, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/president-of-iran-hassan-rouhani-time-to-engage/2013/09/19/4d2da564-213e-11e3-966c-9c4293c47ebe_story.html.

²¹⁰ Bakhsh, “The Six Presidents.”

right to develop nuclear energy), fostering **mutual respect** between America and Iran, and statements **against violence and extremism**.

Regarding the pursuit of nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction (WMD), the Rouhani administration vigorously claims that the possession and stockpiling of nuclear weapons is contrary to Shia Islam—based on a *fatwa* (a religious decree) issued by Khamenei—and that the Islamic Republic’s nuclear program is intended only for peaceful purposes. Although the regime claims that Khamenei issued a *fatwa* against WMDs, the edict has not been publicly released.²¹¹ Furthermore, using Khamenei’s presumed *fatwa* as evidence that nuclear weapons are “un-Islamic” does not seem to carry much weight since the regime does many other things contrary to Islam.²¹² Nevertheless, Rouhani and his foreign minister, Javid Zarif, are marketing the theme that **Iran is not a threat** to the Middle East region, and that Iran is defensive-minded, and therefore would not go on the offensive. Speaking on behalf of their administration and their own beliefs, they are probably correct. However, they do not speak for other factions—especially hardliners in Iran who would be most likely to support a nuclear weapons program. Ahmadinejad’s hardline mentor Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi, for example, “is theologically permitted to issue a contrary *fatwa*” that would endorse the procurement of nuclear weapons—an edict that would be binding on his followers.²¹³

B. FINALIZED CATEGORIES—NARRATIVES FROM THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

Step three in the research process identifies relationships, concepts, or patterns within categories that could lead to the development of a theory or a framework that offers insight and provides a meaningful guide to understand Iran.²¹⁴ The categories listed from the aforementioned primary sources, therefore, were analyzed for connections, patterns, and emerging phenomenon. As a result, the following three

²¹¹ IHS Jane’s, *Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment - Iran*, Article #20 Page 17 of 18.

²¹² Fathali Moghaddam, Private Conversation, July 8, 2014.

²¹³ Mohebat Ahdiyyih, “Ahmadinejad and the Mahdi,” *Middle East Quarterly* XV: Number 4, no. Fall 2008: 27–36, accessed June 6, 2014, <http://www.meforum.org/1985/ahmadinejad-and-the-mahdi>.

²¹⁴ Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research*, 12.

categories emerged as the most common narratives from the primary sources: 1) establishing a government representing true or pure Islam; 2) protecting the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Revolution; and 3) fighting oppression and imperialism. Table 1 illustrates how each theme relates to the three categories; however, because the themes are connected, they overlap and some are repeated in more than one column.

Establishing a Government Representing True or Pure Islam	Protecting the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Revolution	Fighting Oppression and Imperialism
Divine inspiration, law and command through the Prophet Mohammed, the Imamate, and the Qur'an	Guarding against conspiracies that threaten Islam	The battle between good and evil, the oppressed and the oppressor
Islamic government through <i>velayat-e faqih</i> - 'the governance of the jurist' (religious scholars)	Iran's armed forces will defend its borders and protect the regime	The ongoing fight against oppressive, colonial governments and the greed of capitalism; a duty of all Muslims
The theme of justice both in Islamic law and for the enemies of Islam	Iran's rights of self-determination and autonomy (especially within the context of the nuclear talks)	Anti-America and anti-Western sentiments; the arrogance of superpowers
Abolishing the evils of monarchy, moral decay, and corruption	Abolishing the evils of moral decay, and corruption	Anti-Israel and anti-Zionism
Duties and responsibilities of Muslims and the Islamic government	Sacrifice and martyrdom in defending the Islamic Republic	Iran's rights of self-determination and autonomy
The importance of sacrifice and martyrdom as a duty	Exporting the Revolution beyond Iran's borders	The rejection of violence and extremism
Preparing for the reappearance of al-Mahdi through an Islamic government	Preparing for the reappearance of al-Mahdi in future battle between good and evil	The petition for mutual respect (especially from America)

Table 1. Finalized Categories

These three categories, then, will be used as the major religious narratives going forward in this analysis. Narratives, in essence, are the stories and context that give meaning to action. In his book, *The New Global Insecurity: How Terrorism, Environmental Collapse, Economic Inequalities, and Resource Shortages Are Changing Our World*, Dr. Moghaddam explains how narratives work: "Human beings are motivated to make their lives meaningful, and construct and ascribe meaning to

themselves, their actions, and their surroundings in all situations. The most pervasive strategy people use to make their lives meaningful is through the construction of narratives.”²¹⁵ Thus, the collection of narratives as found in Table 1, become the religious frameworks for Iranian aggression. They serve as the backdrops or context behind the sacred carriers and tools—the enabling factors the Iranian regime could use to mobilize against or attack the United States and its interests. The next chapter introduces and examines Iran’s most prominent sacred carriers and religious tools, and then incorporates the findings into analytic scenarios that are relevant to U.S. national security interests.

²¹⁵ Fathali Moghaddam, *The New Global Insecurity: How Terrorism, Environmental Collapse, Economic Inequalities, and Resource Shortages Are Changing Our World* (Praeger, 2010), Kindle Location 1285–1286.

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VI. ANALYSIS

This chapter implements step four in the research process: analyzing the patterns, connections and phenomenon, specifically through sacred carriers and tools, which emerge within the context of the three categories or religious narratives. The goal is to determine whether or not these elements emerge as significant factors in answering the research question. As mentioned in the introduction, the purpose of this research is not to predict whether or not Iran will act upon its religious beliefs, rather, it examines the religious options—the sacred carriers and tools—that could play a key role in future Iranian aggression directed at the United States.

After a discussion of Iran’s sacred carriers and religious tools, this chapter presents three assessments that examine Iran’s sacred carriers and religious tools through the paradigms of past, present, and future scenarios. These three scenarios pull the findings and analysis together into examples that are relevant to U.S. national security interests.

A. SACRED CARRIERS

Sacred carriers can take the form of divinely appointed individuals, end-times signs or symbols, religious traditions, and holy sites, books, or documents. Moghaddam further explains that the “concept of carrier is broader and more dynamic than the traditional symbol in a number of ways. Most important, carriers are about the narratives that construct, sustain, and propagate meaning.”²¹⁶ An example of a sacred carrier in the Christian faith is the cross, which not only symbolizes the death of Christ, but also takes on a deeper meaning about a belief in God, and the importance of sacrifice.²¹⁷ For the purposes of this research, then, a sacred carrier plays the role of a catalyst, a trigger, or an enabler to further propagate meaning and action. The following sacred carriers stood out as the most relevant within major narratives: a) the Supreme Leader of Iran, b) the Day

²¹⁶ Moghaddam, *The Psychology of Dictatorship*, 95.

²¹⁷ Moghaddam, *The New Global Insecurity: How Terrorism, Environmental Collapse, Economic Inequalities, and Resource Shortages Are Changing Our World*, Kindle Location 1392–2739.

of Ashura commemoration, and c) al-Mahdi—the Hidden Imam and promised savior in Twelver Shia Islam.

1. The Supreme Leader of Iran

The position of Supreme Leader in Iran is perhaps the most powerful sacred carrier at this point in Iran's post-revolutionary history. Not only is the Supreme Leader the primary decision-maker in the Islamic Republic, he is also the deputy to the Hidden Imam, Mohammed al-Mahdi. While not all Iranians agree with the religious teachings of the current Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, it is his position as the IRGC commander-in-chief, and his political control over the three branches of government that makes him a living sacred carrier and the ultimate authoritarian in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Moghaddam explains that "in dictatorships the dictator becomes a sacred carrier, and because as a sacred carrier his value and divinity become absolute, any form of disobedience to his dictates become unacceptable, just as turning one's back to Christ or Mohammed or other divine messengers is unacceptable in the eyes of Christian and Muslim believers."²¹⁸

Iran's first and most influential supreme leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, defined Islamic government "as the rule of divine law over men."²¹⁹ As the supervisor and executor of that divine law in Iran, the position of supreme leader, becomes the most powerful sacred carrier, with the authority to lead the country down a path of aggression based on a religious notion. "The word of the supreme leader in Iran is more than a command, it is a commandment," writes Moghaddam, "Anyone who disobeys faces the ultimate punishment."²²⁰

The supreme leader and the ruling clergy can, therefore, enforce punishment through the IRGC and Basij militia. Whether or not the citizens of Iran agree with or want to follow the supreme leader is immaterial, as long as the IRGC backs the leader

²¹⁸ Moghaddam, *The Psychology of Dictatorship*, 97.

²¹⁹ Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini; Translated and Annotated by Hamid Algar*, Kindle Location 681.

²²⁰ Moghaddam, *From the Terrorists' Point of View: What They Experience and Why They Come to Destroy*, Kindle Location 922–2403.

and is therefore willing to suppress the people. The supreme leader/sacred carrier, therefore, needs a combination of religious authority and military force—through the IRGC and Basij militia—to keep control.

2. The Day of Ashura Commemoration

The Day of Ashura (the 10th day of the Islamic month of Muharram) marks the martyrdom of Imam Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammed, and, according to Shia tradition, the rightful heir and divinely mandated leader of Islam. (See Chapter III for additional information about the Day of Ashura, Imam Husayn, and the Battle of Karbala.) The commemoration of the Day of Ashura, therefore, represents a very powerful sacred carrier not only as a ritualistic tradition, but more importantly, as a sign of religious identity. Vali Nasr describes Ashura as “an occasion for collective atonement through lamentation and self-flagellation. It is a distinctly Shia practice and has no parallel in Sunnism...Ashoura is a day when the Shias announce who they are—often going to great extremes to do so.”²²¹

The commemoration includes processions of young men, walking four abreast, beating their chests and whipping their backs as they rhythmically chant “Ya Husayn” in memory of Husayn.²²² It is a day of atonement as participants weep and pray for forgiveness. And it is a day of drama as the Shia publicly and privately recount and the narrative of Husayn’s martyrdom. For Shias, the Day of Ashura, as a sacred carrier, conveys powerful themes relating to sacrifice, martyrdom, purity, and injustice. It is especially important as a symbolic means for Shia Muslims to mobilize physically and spiritually in remembrance of the sacrifice and martyrdom of Imam Husayn.

3. Al-Mahdi—The Hidden Imam

The twelfth “hidden” imam, Mohammed al-Mahdi, believed by the Shia to be the promised savior of Islam, also functions as divinely appointed sacred carrier. It is al-Mahdi, the “Lord of the Age” who, according to Shia doctrine, will return to establish

²²¹ Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future*, Kindle Locations 240–243.

²²² *Ibid.*, Kindle Locations 261–264.

justice and Islamic law throughout the world. Moreover, the mere belief in the final appearance of al-Mahdi as Allah's appointed future world leader becomes a sacred carrier with millenarian implications.

Also, of importance are the purported deplorable and oppressive conditions of the world, or "signs of the times" that will precede the prophesied reappearance of the Mahdi. According to the narrative, relief from suffering and injustice as a result of the re-emergence of the Mahdi will lay the groundwork for a better life for Shia Muslims and the world community. Sachedina explains that "the rule of the Mahdi alone will establish the era of absolute prosperity which will obtain until the final resurrection takes place and the cycle of creation is completed. Al-Mahdi will thus accomplish the return of creation to its original purity."²²³ As Khamenei's office proclaimed in a recent tweet, "the entire believing mankind is awaiting a savior...The promised Mahdi is not exclusive to Shias"²²⁴ (See chapter three for Shia doctrinal information about al-Mahdi.)

B. RELIGIOUS TOOLS

If the sacred carriers are the means "through which vitally important values are sustained and passed, and something true believers are willing to die for," then the tools are complimentary, and become the mechanism for carrying out a potential religious action. While the Iranian regime has many tools at its disposal to govern, protect, enforce, or propagate its Islamic revolution, the following are highlighted in this analysis because they have been used by the Iranian regime in the past to mobilize followers for religious reasons, and/or the tool could pose a significant security risk or threat to the United States and Israel. Thus, the primary religious tools include, but are not limited to: 1) the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and Basij militia, 2) Hezbollah, 3) martyrdom operations, 4) *The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 5) Friday prayers and the mosque, and 6) mass media, social media and propaganda.

²²³ Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism*, 178.

²²⁴ https://twitter.com/khamenei_ir/status/477525617559478272

1. Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Basij Militia

For the purposes of this research, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is similar to a religious toolbox, with its many conventional and asymmetric military units that serve to protect the Iranian regime, as well as the elite Qods force, which facilitates and conducts external operations worldwide. As discussed in the previous chapter, the IRGC is the most powerful military and economic organization in Iran. Since its purpose is to protect the Iranian regime and the principles of the Islamic revolution, it can be assumed that the IRGC leadership will do the bidding of the supreme leader.

The Iranian constitution clearly establishes, in Article 144, a religious requirement for Iran's armed forces: "The Army of the Islamic Republic of Iran must be an Islamic army, i.e., committed to Islamic ideology and the people. It must accept into its service deserving individuals who are true to the goals of the Islamic Revolution and devoted to realizing them."²²⁵ Moreover, Article 151 requires the government to provide military training and facilities for all citizens, in accordance with Islamic criteria, for the defense of the Islamic Republic.²²⁶ And the same article provides scriptural justification from the following Qur'anic verse: "'Muster against them all the men and cavalry at your command, so that you may strike terror into the enemy of God and your enemy and others beside them who are unknown to you but known to God' (8:59)."²²⁷

Another tool that falls under the authority of the IRGC is the Basij Resistance Force or militia. As discussed in chapter four, the Basijis are "the eyes and ears of the Islamic regime and are considered extremely loyal."²²⁸ The IRGC uses the Basij militia as a tool for indoctrinating the people and enforcing Islamic laws in "virtually all sectors of Iranian society."²²⁹

²²⁵ Firoozeh Papan-Matin (trans.), "The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (1989 Edition)," 194.

²²⁶ Ibid., 195.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ IHS Jane's, *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment - Iran*, 6.

²²⁹ Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, 34, 63.

2. Hezbollah

Iran is a state sponsor of Hezbollah, a Lebanese-based Shia terrorist organization capable of operating worldwide. (Chapter IV discusses the origins and activities of Hezbollah in more detail.) For the purposes of this chapter, it is important to note that Iran's IRGC-Qods Force was the driving force that created, funded, and trained Hezbollah in Lebanon and they continue to have a controlling interest in Hezbollah to this day.²³⁰ While Hezbollah certainly operates independent of Iran—especially its political party—the organization looks to Iran's Supreme Leader for spiritual guidance under the Shia Islamic order.²³¹ Hezbollah's seeds of identity are deeply rooted in Shia Islam and the religion's manifestation through Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution. According to Nicholas Blanford, author of *Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah's Thirty-Year Struggle Against Israel*, new Hezbollah military recruits “absorb the principles of the Islamic revolution in Iran, obedience to the wali al-faqih [*velayat-e faqih*], and enmity toward Israel. They are taught religion first, before they ever see a gun.”²³² By working through its non-state Shia allies, most notably Hezbollah, Iran has developed network of surrogates with the capability of conducting attacks or threatening U.S. interests worldwide.²³³

3. Martyrdom Operations

As mentioned in Chapter III, Shia Muslims memorialize the themes of victimhood and martyrdom through the sacrifice of Husayn on the Day of Ashura. This section expands on the narrative of martyrdom intrinsic to Twelver Shi'ism's history, practices, and doctrine. Moojan Momen, author of *An Introduction to Shi'I Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism*, explains the role of martyrdom and its larger meaning within the religion:

²³⁰ U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Subcommittee Hearing: Hezbollah's Strategic Shift: A Global Terrorist Threat*, 10.

²³¹ Anders Strindberg and Mats Wärn, *Islamism: Religion, Radicalization, and Resistance* (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity, 2011), 124 and 126.

²³² Nicholas Blanford, *Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah's Thirty-Year Struggle Against Israel* (Random House LLC, 2011), Kindle Location 1853.

²³³ IHS Jane's, *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment - Iran*, Article #2 Page 4 of 17.

The theme of martyrdom and patient suffering is one that is very strong in Shi'ism...This theme is embodied in the lives of the Imams themselves who are each regarded as having suffered intense persecution...and who are all popularly considered to have been martyred (except of course the Twelfth Imam...) ... and, at each of their anniversaries, their lives are recounted emphasizing in particular the wrongs they have suffered at the hands of the Umayyad and 'Abbasid governments.²³⁴

Momen further describes “a strange paradox” in Twelver Shi'ism where the Imams were praised for their endurance in suffering through oppression, “yet the greatest Shi'i hero, the Imam Husayn, is praised and commended for not submitting to tyranny and rising up (*qiyamat*) and fighting even in the face of overwhelming odds and the certainty of martyrdom.”²³⁵ This same paradox was evident in contemporary Iran before and after the 1979 revolution. For years under the Shah's reign, the Shia faithful seemed to endure the Shah's dictatorship and his secret police (SAVAK) with patient suffering like the Imams of old. Then, through the teachings of secular and religious revolutionaries, the fight against oppression and tyranny reached a tipping point. As Abbas Milani points out, one of those tipping points may have been the October 1978 ‘ten nights of poetry’ led by secular dissidents (artists and intellectuals) who “read works critical of the [Shah's] regime, its censorship, and its undemocratic ways” to an estimated 10,000 people in the open air.²³⁶

In the end, however, it was Khomeini's theory of Islamic government and his use of religious narratives, such as martyrdom and sacrifice, which helped spark the final events leading to the revolution. “When the opportunity seems right,” explains Momen, “the Shi'i masses can be whipped up to the frenzy of revolution by appeal to the spirit of uprising (*qiyam*) of Husayn. In this state, as was seen in Iran in 1979, the Shi'is are prepared to go into the streets unarmed in eager anticipation of martyrdom.”²³⁷

²³⁴ Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism*, 236.

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Milani, *The Shah*, 389.

²³⁷ Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism*, 236.

4. The Constitution of Iran

The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, as a religious tool, memorializes and establishes Twelver Shi'ism as the official religion, and then articulates how this brand of Islamic law and government is to be enacted. It codifies into law some of the most important narratives leading up to the 1979 revolution. For example, Article Two establishes up front that “the Islamic Republic is a system based on the faith in: One God (“There is no god but God”), the exclusive attribution of sovereignty and the legislation of law to Him, and the necessity of surrender to His commands.”²³⁸ Article Two ends with the call to reject or negate “all kinds of oppression, authoritarianism, or the acceptance of domination” in order to safeguard the “wondrous and exalted status of human beings and their freedom, which must be endowed with responsibility before God.”²³⁹

Furthermore, in the preface of Hamid Algar’s translation of the Iranian constitution he writes: “The most important single difference [from Iran’s 1906 constitution] was the introduction...of the key concept of *vilayat-i faqih*, ‘the governance of the *faqih*.’ This doctrine, which Imam Khomeini had outlined at length in his celebrated lectures...is the keystone of the new political structure, ensuring that the Republic will be Islamic in substance and daily functioning as well as designation.”²⁴⁰ Although the constitution refers to Iran as a “Republic,” in reality it functions as a dictatorship where one unelected leader, appointed for life, makes decisions for everyone.²⁴¹

5. The Friday Prayer

Friday prayers are held just after noon usually in the town or neighborhood mosque. The Friday prayer is a communal prayer, which takes the place of the second of

²³⁸ Firoozeh Papan-Matin (trans.), “The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (1989 Edition),” 166.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Hamid Algar, *Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran* (Mizan Press Berkeley, 1980), 10.

²⁴¹ Moghaddam, *The Psychology of Dictatorship*, 113.

the five prayers Muslims offer daily. The call to Friday prayer follows this directive from the Qur'an, Sura 62 Al-Jumua'a, 9–10:

O ye who believe! When the call is proclaimed to prayer on Friday (the Day of Assembly), Hasten earnestly to the Remembrance of Allah, and leave off Business (and traffic): That is best for you if ye but knew! And when the Prayer is finished, then may ye disperse through the land, and seek of the Bounty of Allah: and Remember Allah frequently that ye may prosper.

Friday, therefore, represents “the Day of Assembly” for Muslims—the day when local clerics give instruction to their communities. In Iran, a collective or communal prayer is thought to be much more powerful than when done individually.²⁴² It is not uncommon for the Friday prayer message to be coordinated or directed by the religious elite and the Supreme Leader. In his book *Islamic Government*, Khomeini writes:

The Friday sermon was more than a sura from the Qur'an and a prayer followed by a few brief words. Entire armies used to be mobilized by the Friday sermon and proceed directly from the mosque to the battlefield—and a man who sets out from the mosque to go into battle will fear only God, not poverty or hardship, and his army will be victorious and triumphant. When you look at the Friday sermons given in that age and the sermons of the Commander of the Faithful (upon whom be peace), you see that their purpose was to set people in motion, to arouse them to fight and sacrifice themselves for Islam, to resolve the sufferings of the people of this world.²⁴³

Hence, the Friday prayer can and has been used as a religious tool by the Iranian regime as a means of influence or control, and to mobilize the masses. The Friday prayer, in essence, becomes the weekly stopping point when faithful Muslims assemble, pray, and listen to what the ruling religious class in Iran wants them to understand and do.

6. Mass Media, Social Media, and Propaganda

Chapter 12, Article 175 of the Iranian constitution establishes: “The leader appoints and removes the head of the mass media of the Islamic Republic of Iran. A

²⁴² Moghaddam, Private Conversation.

²⁴³ Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini; Translated and Annotated by Hamid Algar*, Kindle Locations 1922–1926.

council consisting of representatives of the President of the Republic, the head of the judiciary, and the Islamic Consultative Assembly (two persons from each), will supervise this organization.”²⁴⁴ The same article directs that “freedom of expression and dissemination of ideas must be granted through the mass media...with due observance of Islamic criteria and the welfare of the country.”²⁴⁵ Iran’s record of freedom of the press, however, has been anything but free. The clause “with due observance of Islamic criteria and the welfare of the country” undoubtedly grants the ruling elite license to censure, restrict, and imprison opposing voices. The World Press Freedom Index 2014 listed Iran as 173rd on the negativity scale out of 180 countries in terms of freedom of the press.²⁴⁶ Despite Rouhani’s campaign promises to release political prisoners and promote speech and media freedom, Reporters Without Borders claims that at least 10 journalists and bloggers have been arrested since Rouhani’s election victory, “10 others have been sentenced to a combined total of 72 years...and three newspapers have been closed or forced to suspend publishing under pressure from the authorities.”²⁴⁷

The ruling religious class in the Islamic Republic has essentially cleared the airwaves for the regime’s preferred discourse by restricting the press, and banning access to YouTube and social media sites. While up to 30% of Iranians reportedly circumvent Internet filters by using virtual private networks (VPNs) connected to foreign servers (and many have their own Facebook accounts), the regime controls the majority of the media and propaganda bandwidth within Iran’s borders.²⁴⁸ The media, in all its forms, therefore, is a tool at the regime’s disposal—to use politically, religiously, or philosophically as the regime sees fit.

²⁴⁴ Firoozeh Papan-Matin (trans.), “The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (1989 Edition),” 199.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Reporters Without Borders, “World Press Freedom Index 2014,” accessed June 27, 2014, <http://rsf.org/index2014/en-index2014.php#>.

²⁴⁷ Reporters Without Borders, “Rouhani’s First 100 Days See No Progress on Freedom of Information,” November 19, 2013, <http://en.rsf.org/iran-rouhani-s-first-100-days-see-no-19-11-2013,45474.html>.

²⁴⁸ Helia Ighani, “Facebook in Iran: The Supreme Leader,” *The Iran Primer*, April 16, 2013, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2013/apr/16/facebook-iran-supreme-leader>.

Despite their own ban on social media, the supreme leader and other government officials use multiple social media platforms—mostly in English and Arabic—to broadcast a specific message outside Iran’s borders. According to a U.S. Institute of Peace report, “the supreme leader’s social media appears aimed primarily at a regional and international audience...On each site, Khamenei’s primary message is that the Islamic Republic is a rising power in the region and that its ideology has growing influence. He credits Iran for inspiring the Arab uprisings as part of a wider ‘Islamic awakening’ that imitates the 1979 revolution.”²⁴⁹ The leadership’s social media, therefore, is another tool the regime uses to influence English and Arabic speaking audiences—primarily outside Iran’s borders.

C. THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE: EXAMPLES OF RELIGIOUS-BASED AGGRESSION

The following paragraphs examine how the sacred carriers and tools can be combined—within the framework of the contextual narratives—as religious options to target the United States and its interests. These three assessments are supported by historical precedent, by Islamic doctrine or law, or through the correlation of primary source material found in the research.

1. The Past—The Iran–Iraq War

The Iran–Iraq War contains many of the religious narratives and sacred carriers and tools previously outlined in this chapter. Khomeini, as the supreme leader and sacred carrier, effectively framed the Iran–Iraq War as a religious war—a battle between good and evil, a war against the oppressive American superpower and a corrupt Sunni regime. It was the first military test for the new Islamic Republic under the leadership of Khomeini, and, in a sense, it helped bring solidarity to a fledgling Islamic state. Vali Nasr, author of *The Shia Revival*, remarked: “The more demanding the war became, the more the regime depicted it as the battle of good and evil—of the Twelfth Imam versus his enemies. The fervor bred a cult of martyrdom in the populace and made sacrifice for

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

the faith a central feature of revolutionary Shia politics.” The Iranian nation, under an Islamic Republic banner assumed a collective religious identity.

Although the war was started by Iraq, and led by a Sunni dictator in Saddam Hussein, Khomeini focused on America’s support of Saddam Hussein as a way to galvanize anger against the United States. In a September 1980 speech, Khomeini exclaimed:

Iran has tried to sever all its relations with this Great Satan [America] and it is for this reason that it now finds wars imposed upon it. America has urged Iraq to spill the blood of our young men...Let the Muslim nations be aware that Iran is a country effectively at war with America, and that our martyrs—the brave young men of our army and the Revolutionary Guards—are defending Iran and the Islam we hold dear against America.²⁵⁰

Moreover, as part of the context surrounding the start of the war, the American Embassy hostages in Tehran were still in captivity (until January 1981). Remembering the CIA’s successful coup to overthrow Iran’s government in 1953, Iranians viewed the United States with extreme suspicion and had labeled the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, the “The Den of Spies.”

The Iran–Iraq War was, in a sense, a modern version of the Battle of Karbala in 680 AD where Imam Husayn, representing the Shia (Iran), fought for justice against the Umayyad Caliphate, representing Sunni Islam (Iraq). The story of Karbala, especially remembered on the Day of Ashura, functioned as a sacred carrier to mobilize thousands to become martyrs for the war. Additionally, the Friday prayer was used as a tool to recruit volunteers, especially from the smaller, un-educated and rural villages. The Friday prayer leaders, according to Ray Takeyh, “routinely used their sermons to suggest that God had offered Iranians such an unsavory foe to vanquish in order for them to claim a special place in his kingdom.”²⁵¹ As the religious leaders proclaimed that martyrdom guaranteed a place in heaven, the “human wave” martyrdom attacks became one of

²⁵⁰ Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini; Translated and Annotated by Hamid Algar*, Kindle Locations 4466–4470.

²⁵¹ Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs*, 87.

primary strategies to offset the superior Iraqi conventional ground forces.²⁵² Martyrs from the Iran–Iraq War to this day are remembered and celebrated in Iran. To illustrate how the theme of martyrdom continues to be propagated in modern-day Iran, the Supreme Leader’s office recently tweeted an image of a mother kissing her son as he prepares for possible martyrdom in the Iran–Iraq War. The infographic, shown in Figure 5, attributes the following caption to Ayatollah Khamenei: “Iranian Mothers coupled with the utmost of their feminine emotions and compassion with a spirit of martyrdom and resistance against the invaders.”²⁵³



Figure 5. Khamenei Tweet: “Iranian Mothers”

²⁵² Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future*, Kindle Location 1634.

²⁵³ https://twitter.com/khamenei_ir/status/486143967067897856/photo/1, July 7, 2014

Additionally, the sacred carrier notion of al-Mahdi, and his reappearance, played a part in encouraging would-be martyrs. Nasr, recounts how common soldiers, “peasant boys raised in an atmosphere of simple piety,” would each receive a “plastic key representing the key to the gates of paradise. Many nights during the war, Iranian soldiers would wake up to see a white-shrouded figure on a white horse blessing them. These apparitions of the “Twelfth Imam” were professional actors sent to boost morale.”²⁵⁴ The volunteer soldiers, according to Nasr, “were sentinels of the Twelfth Imam, and to them the war was a spiritual as well as a physical fight.”²⁵⁵

Moreover, the war afforded Khomeini the opportunity to build and strengthen the IRGC—a parallel military to the already established, but less trusted Iranian armed forces (the *Artesh*) which carried over from the Shah’s military.²⁵⁶ The IRGC eventually took the lead in fighting the Iraqis and, according to Alireza Nader, “the Guards’ role in Iran’s so-called ‘holy-defense’ against Iraq has been used over the years to burnish their credentials as defender of the revolution and the nation.”²⁵⁷

Although the Khomeini regime branded the Iran–Iraq War as a religious battle, it was also compelled to rely on nationalism, especially early on, to mobilize support for the war effort. Amid the uncertainty and confusion of war, “a nationalist revival swept Tehran and the rest of the country. People of very different persuasions, many of whom had been fighting one another in the postrevolution era, banded together to fight the Iraqi invaders.”²⁵⁸ Moghaddam points out that in situations where societies experience serious political and economic uncertainty or a threat, they “turn to a savior who they hope will lead them out of the crisis.”²⁵⁹ Such was the case with the Iranian people and Khomeini. The external threat from Iraq served to galvanize support for Khomeini’s dictatorial regime and, as a result, “the central government became a stronger and far more

²⁵⁴ Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future*, Kindle Locations 1624–1629.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., Kindle Locations 1633–1634.

²⁵⁶ Nader, “The Revolutionary Guards.”

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Moghaddam, *The Psychology of Dictatorship*, 64.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 65.

expansive and intrusive force in society.²⁶⁰ Over time, as opposition voices were silenced, the regime could depend more fully upon the growing strength of the IRGC and Basij militia, along with Friday Prayers where the religious narratives and obligations could spread more easily to the masses.

While the contemporary Iran of today, 35 years after the revolution, is not the same politically and demographically as Khomeini's Iran of the 1980s, the sacred carriers continue to be relevant and many of the religious tools have been upgraded. The implications of how the newly established Islamic Republic of Iran utilized these sacred carriers and religious tools in the Iran–Iraq War perhaps foreshadows how Iran could fight a war in the future. Furthermore, the anti-American narrative was, and still is, essential in protecting the regime. As Moghaddam explains, “those who wonder why the clerics in Iran insist on whipping up anti-American sentiments and organizing and leading rallies against the United States...should keep in mind that without the ‘Great Satan’ to fight against, the regime in Tehran would collapse more quickly.”²⁶¹ This type of displaced aggression serves to keep the regime in control.²⁶²

2. The Present—An Asymmetric War

Iran's religious tools today—especially the IRGC, Hezbollah, and mass and social media—are much more robust and potentially more powerful than they were in the 1980s. As mentioned in Chapter IV, the IRGC gained a strong economic foothold in Iran following the Iran–Iraq War. Moreover, during the Iran–Iraq War, the IRGC Qods Force helped form and train its Lebanese-based Hezbollah proxy terrorist group. The Qods Force and Hezbollah now operate globally, and both organizations feature a cadre of experienced war-hardened veterans in the senior command ranks.²⁶³ Given the current

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 64.

²⁶¹ Moghaddam, *From the Terrorists' Point of View: What They Experience and Why They Come to Destroy*, Kindle Location 1197.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Will Fulton, “The IRGC Command Network—Formal Structures and Informal Influence,” American Enterprise Institute, July 22, 2013, <http://www.aei.org/papers/foreign-and-defense-policy/regional/middle-east-and-north-africa/the-irgc-command-network-formal-structures-and-informal-influence/>.

symbiotic relationship between the supreme leader and the IRGC, their influence over Hezbollah, and their control over Iran's economic lifeline—the oil and gas industry—they are well-positioned to conduct low intensity, asymmetric warfare against the United States and Israel.

Iran's asymmetric warfare doctrine is both defensive and offensive in nature. Sourcing his own 2012 interviews with Israeli Intelligence officials, Hezbollah expert Matthew Levitt writes in his book *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God*, that in 2010, "Hezbollah engaged in detailed talks with Iranian officials to lay out Hezbollah's role in Iran's larger plan for a coordinated shadow war targeting Israeli, American, British, and Gulf state interests."²⁶⁴ Levitt explains that, in addition to conducting revenge operations against Israeli targets, another primary goal was to establish "a deterrent threat by convincing Western powers that an attack on Iran would result in—among other things—asymmetric terrorist attacks worldwide."²⁶⁵ Most recently, the Qods Force—with possible help from Hezbollah—is believed to be behind the 2011 plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador via a mass casualty attack in Washington, DC.²⁶⁶ With the Qods Force and Hezbollah, therefore, already engaged in a shadow war against the U.S. and Israel, the following paragraphs establish how the sacred carriers and additional religious tools emerge into the larger narrative germane to this thesis.

Khamenei and the ruling clergy in Iran—after more than 35 years since the revolution—continue to perceive the U.S. and Israel as enemies and direct threats to the tenets of the Islamic Republic. Khamenei, like his predecessor, consistently engages in anti-American and anti-Zionist rhetoric as foundational talking point in his speeches. Regarding Israel, for example, Khamenei's official website promotes his views on the "Survival of Palestine and the annihilation of Israel:"

²⁶⁴ Matthew Levitt, *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God* (Georgetown University Press, 2013), 361.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Subcommittee Hearing: Hezbollah's Strategic Shift: A Global Terrorist Threat*, 4.

Today the leaders of the usurping Zionist regime and their American supporter—who are foolishly giving them unconditional support—are trying to erase the name of Palestine from history and from the minds of the world’s people...They will not be able to annihilate the name of Palestine. It is the Zionists who will disappear from the face of the earth and from history. But Palestine and the Palestinian nation will stay...By Allah’s favor, Palestine’s flag will be raised by the faithful Palestinian and Lebanese youth.²⁶⁷

A primary religious duty of all Muslims, Sunni or Shia, is to come to the defense of fellow Muslims—especially when infidels or non-believers occupy their land. According to Khamenei “the issue of Palestine is a crucial issue for all Muslims. All Shia and Sunni scholars have explicitly stated that if a part of Muslim territories is occupied by the enemies of Islam, it will be every Muslim’s duty to fight in order to restore the lost piece of land.”²⁶⁸

Iran’s hardliners see the conflict against Israel not only as a duty, but also as a religious trigger for action. Under the direction of the IRGC Qods Force, both Hezbollah and Hamas, have received weapons to aid in their resistance to the “Zionist” regime. Indeed, many of the rockets fired by Hamas into Israel today likely come from Iran. In early March 2014, for example, Israel announced that it had intercepted an Iranian shipment of surface-to-surface rockets “bound for ‘terrorist organizations’ operating in Gaza.”²⁶⁹ As the IRGC hardliners continue to gain power and influence in Iran, they will likely use religion to mobilize more supporters, inside and outside Iran, to fight with Hamas to remove the Zionist regime and restore the Palestinian people to their land. Iran’s Basij force commander stated in February 2014, “The enemies must know today that the Basijis are continuously ready and are counting down the time when the order of liberating Jerusalem is issued.”²⁷⁰ This statement, while certainly part of Iran’s propaganda campaign to project power in the region, reflects the hardliner view from within Iran.

²⁶⁷ Ali Khamenei, “The Supreme Leader’s View of Palestine,” accessed March 15, 2014, http://english.khamenei.ir/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1202&Itemid=13#The%20importance%20of%20the%20issue%20of%20Palestine.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Saad Abedine and Michael Schwartz, “Israel Intercepts Ship with Weapons Headed to Gaza,” CNN, March 6, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/03/05/world/meast/israel-intercepted-weapons/index.html>.

²⁷⁰ “Iran News Round Up February 28, 2014,” accessed August 10, 2014, <http://www.irantracker.org/iran-news-round-february-28-2014>.

In other examples, Khamenei uses social media extensively in English and Arabic as a means to shape the Iranian discourse against America and Israel. Many of Khamenei's tweets are, in fact, small snippets from his speeches. According to Khamenei's official Twitter account on March 20, 2014, the Supreme Leader's most important quote of 2013, as show in Figure 6, was tweeted as the following infographic: "If the Zionist regime makes a wrong move, Iran will raze Tel Aviv and Haifa to the ground."²⁷¹ This rhetorical "threat" from Khamenei is likely a response to Israel's repeated warning that it would "strike" Iran should it develop a nuclear weapon.



Figure 6. Khamenei Tweet: "If the Zionist Regime Makes a Wrong Move"

²⁷¹ https://twitter.com/khamenei_ir/status/446635543258886144, March 20, 2014.

On July 26, 2014, during Israel's military campaign against Hamas in Gaza, Khamenei's office tweeted "Why should & how can Israel be eliminated? Ayatollah Khamenei's answer to 9 key questions abt [sic] elimination of #Israel."²⁷² The tweet had an accompanying infographic with the nine key questions (shown in Figure 7).

9 key questions about elimination of Israel		
No.	Questions	Ayatollah Khamenei's response
1	Why should the Zionist regime be eliminated?	During its 66 years of life so far, the fake Zionist regime has tried to realize its goals by means of infanticide, homicide, violence & iron fist while boasts about it blatantly.
2	What does elimination of Israel mean in the viewpoint of Imam Khomeini?	The only means of bringing Israeli crimes to an end is the elimination of this regime. And of course the elimination of Israel does not mean the massacre of the Jewish people in this region. The Islamic Republic has proposed a practical & logical mechanism for this to international communities.
3	What is the proper way of eliminating Israel?	All the original people of Palestine including Muslims, Christians and Jews wherever they are, whether inside Palestine, in refugee camps in other countries or just anywhere else, take part in a public and organized referendum. Naturally the Jewish immigrants who have been persuaded into emigration to Palestine do not have the right to take part in this referendum.
4	What happened to the non-Palestinian emigrants?	The ensuing government, which comes into power after a referendum among the original Palestinians, once settled will decide whether the non-Palestinian emigrants who have immigrated to this country over the past years can continue living in Palestine or should return to their home countries.
5	How will the proposed referendum succeed?	This is a fair and logical plan that can be properly understood by global public opinion and can enjoy the supports of the independent nations and governments. Certainly we do not expect the usurper Zionists to easily surrender to this proposal and this is where the role of governments, nations and organization of resistance is shaped and defined.
6	Until a referendum is held, how should Israel be confronted?	Up until the day when this homicidal and infanticidal regime is eliminated through a referendum, powerful confrontation and resolute and armed resistance is the cure of this ruinous regime. The only means of confronting a regime which commits crimes beyond one's thought and imagination is a resolute and armed confrontation.
7	What is the most urgent action to take for militarily confront Israel?	The West Bank should be armed like Gaza and those who are interested in Palestine's destiny should take action to arm the people of the West Bank so that the sorrows and grieves of the Palestinian people will reduce in the light of their powerful hands and the weakness of the Zionist enemy.
8	What solutions are not acceptable?	We recommend neither a classical war by the army of Muslim countries nor to throw migrated Jews at sea and certainly not an arbitration by UN or other international organizations.
9	Why do we oppose compromise proposals?	That the rockets of Gaza have led to the crimes of Israel is a wrong conclusion. In the west Bank, people's only weapon is stones and there are not many types of weaponry. But this regime massacres and humiliates people there and destroys their houses and farms. The fact that Yasser Arafat was poisoned and killed by Israel while he had the most cooperation with the Zionists proves that in the viewpoint of Israel, "peace" is simply a trick for more crimes and occupation.

KHAMENEI.IR

Figure 7. Khamenei's "9 Key Questions About the Elimination of Israel"

²⁷² https://twitter.com/khamenei_ir/status/493008303384199168, July 26, 2014.

Notably, in Khamenei's "9 key questions about elimination of Israel" (Figure 7), he clarifies what is meant by the elimination of Israel from the viewpoint of his predecessor, Imam Khomeini: "And of course the elimination of Israel does not mean the massacre of the Jewish people in this region" (point two). Rather, Khamenei calls for all the "original people of Palestine including Muslims, Christians and Jews" to take part in a public referendum; however, the "Jewish immigrants who have been persuaded into emigration to Palestine do not have the right to take part in this referendum" (point three). This is Khamenei's "proper way of eliminating Israel."

Furthermore, as part of this nine-point declaration, Khamenei infers that the "Zionists" will not "easily surrender to this proposal," therefore, he states, "the only means of confronting a regime which commits crimes beyond one's thought and imagination is a resolute and armed confrontation" (points five and six). This statement supports the idea of an asymmetric war with Hamas and Hezbollah fighting against Israel. And in point eight, Khamenei clarifies that Iran recommends "neither a classical war by the army of Muslim countries"—meaning the Muslim countries (including Iran) cannot defeat Israel's conventional military. As a result, Khamenei emphatically endorses a lower level of "armed resistance" with no compromises—"peace," he states "is simply a trick for more crimes and occupation" (point nine).

Continuing with Israel as a primary target of Iran's resistance, martyrdom also emerges an important religious tool and tactic within the larger asymmetric war effort. Hezbollah, as part of its resistance against Israel for example, discusses martyrdom openly. Hezbollah's Deputy Secretary Sheikh Naim Qassem, in an interview with Nicholas Blanford, discusses the "exceptional particularity" of Hezbollah's fighters and their willingness to sacrifice themselves as martyrs: "First, [it is] faith in Islam and what this means in connection with God, the exalted, and attaining a moral state that gives one self-confidence, strength, hope for the future, readiness to sacrifice [oneself]...This is something essential that we have."²⁷³ The second component, described by Blanford in his interview with Qassem is:

²⁷³ Blanford, *Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah's Thirty-Year Struggle Against Israel*, Kindle Locations 2121–2127.

“readiness for martyrdom” and an understanding that “martyrdom neither shortens nor prolongs life because the timing of death is predestined by God.... Since the outcome of this martyrdom is a divine reward in Heaven, this is something quite important when it comes to mobilization, especially that we have historic leaders who have presented this example, such as the Prophet Mohammed, Imam Ali, and Imam Hussein and others.”²⁷⁴

As noted by Qassem, the sacred carrier of Ashura and its commemoration of the sacrifice of Husayn, contributes to Hezbollah’s the culture of martyrdom.

Hezbollah forced an Israeli withdrawal of Lebanon in 1985 by combining terrorist tactics, martyrdom operations, and guerilla warfare against a far superior Israeli conventional force. This initial victory also had broader implications in the region. Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, for example, looked to Hezbollah’s success and religious justification in the use of suicide tactics in their struggles against Israel.²⁷⁵ Decades later, leading up to the 2006 Lebanon War, Iran (and to some extent Syria) helped transform Hezbollah into a “hybrid” fighting force that learned how to employ both conventional and irregular tactics in a single battlespace.²⁷⁶ Speaking about the future, former U.S. Army Chief of Staff, General George Casey remarked in May 2009 that the conflict that intrigued him the most, and that “speaks more toward what we can expect in the decades ahead, is the one that happened in Lebanon in the summer of 2006.”²⁷⁷

According to Blanford, Hezbollah believes the next war with Israel will “mark the beginning of the end of Israel.”²⁷⁸ In the aftermath of the 34-day Israel-Hezbollah War in 2006, Hezbollah’s Secretary General, Hassan Nasrallah, delivered a series of speeches promising Israel a “big surprise that could change the course of the war and the fate of the region,” and in 2008, he proclaimed that Israel would be eliminated from existence

²⁷⁴ Ibid., Kindle Locations 2121–2127.

²⁷⁵ Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (Columbia University Press, 2013), Kindle Locations 3386–3391.

²⁷⁶ Blanford, *Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah’s Thirty-Year Struggle Against Israel*, Kindle Location 6812.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., Kindle Location 7598.

“because this is a historical and divine law from which there is no escape. This is definite.”²⁷⁹

A progressively overt asymmetric war against America or Israel, therefore, becomes a useful way to displace aggression and build support for the regime—especially at a time when Khamenei and the religious ruling class struggle to balance political, economic, and religious power to preserve the Islamic Revolution. Furthermore, Iran’s conventional military power had limited success in projecting power during the Iran–Iraq War, but has since found success in creating resistance movements—especially the Lebanese Hezbollah—to fight low intensity conflicts across the Middle East.²⁸⁰ This unconventional approach “has left a greater imprint on Iranian military interventions due to its relative military success, cost-effectiveness, and deniability.”²⁸¹

3. The Future—the Belief in the Mahdi’s Reappearance

Article Five of the Iranian constitution declares that “During the absence (*ghayba*) of his holiness, the Lord of the Age, May God all mighty hasten his appearance, the sovereignty of the command [of God] and religious leadership of the community [of believers] in the Islamic Republic of Iran is the responsibility of the *faqih* [the Leader].”²⁸² The Iranian constitution acknowledges and calls for the hastening of the return of the “Lord of the Age”—another name for the Hidden Imam—and writes into law that the supreme leader is in charge until his reappearance. Although Khomeini used the narrative and doctrine of the Mahdi’s return as a fundamental principle in his theory of Islamic government, he was more of pragmatist than a millennialist. According to Amanat, Khomeini “rejected the idea that the ‘ulama [religious scholars] could wage holy war in the Imam’s absence, though he did look forward ultimately to an ‘Islamic World

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

²⁸⁰ Farzan Sabet, “Military Intervention, Iranian-Style,” *War on the Rocks*, June 30, 2014, <http://warontherocks.com/2014/06/military-intervention-iranian-style/>.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² Firoozeh Papan-Matin (trans.), “The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (1989 Edition),” 167–168.

Government’ which would come into being with advent of the Imam.”²⁸³ For Khomeini, then, and many others in the current Iranian regime, one must assume that the awaited Mahdi’s return is not a matter of urgency.²⁸⁴ That is except for Iran’s former hardliner president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who seemed to be at the forefront of Iran’s recent messianic resurgence.

In a 2012 article featured in the Hudson Institute’s *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* journal, Dr. Bernd Kaussler stated, “In recent years, the Islamic Republic has experienced a country-wide resurgence in messianic activity and rhetoric that, in terms its sheer volume and intensity, has not been seen since the revolutionary era over thirty years ago.”²⁸⁵ Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, through his speeches and actions, was one of the primary leaders of this messianic movement. In 2005, Ahmadinejad allocated roughly \$17 million to renovate the Jamkaran mosque (near the religious city of Qom, Iran) where, according to Shiite tradition, the Mahdi will one day ascend.²⁸⁶ Ahmadinejad’s numerous UNGA speeches, as evidenced by the following quote, referenced the Hidden Imam in poetic-like form: “The era of darkness will end, prisoners will return home, the occupied lands will be freed, Palestine and Iraq will be liberated from the dominion of the occupiers...Without any doubt, the Promised One [the Mahdi] who is the ultimate Savior will come...he will establish a bright future and fill the world with justice and beauty.”²⁸⁷

Although Ahmadinejad’s messianic fervor garnered support from within the senior Ayatollah ranks—namely from his mentor, Ayatollah Mesbah-e Yazdi, and from Ayatollah Jannati, chairman of the Guardian Council—many senior clerics were staunchly opposed to his politicization of the doctrine of Mahdism.²⁸⁸ A 2008 *Middle East Quarterly* article titled, “Ahmadinejad and the Mahdi,” states that “the president’s

²⁸³ Amanat, *Apocalyptic Islam and Iranian Shi’ism*, 306.

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ Kaussler, “Is The End Nigh for the Islamic Republic?,” 71.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 72.

²⁸⁷ Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, “Address by H.E. Dr. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad President of the Islamic Republic of Iran before the 62nd Session of the United Nations General Assembly,” September 25, 2007, 10, <http://www.un.org/webcast/ga/62/2007/pdfs/iran-eng.pdf>.

²⁸⁸ Savyon and Mansharof, *The Doctrine of Mahdism: In the Ideological and Political Philosophy of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Ayatollah Mesbah-eYazdi*, 7.

Mahdism has severe repercussions for the clerical basis of the Islamic Republic. Incumbent in the belief in the Mahdi's return is the notion that he will be opposed by the clergy.”²⁸⁹ The article further explains that Ahmadinejad's efforts have already encouraged “a class of lay clerics (*maddah*) much more in tune with his folk belief than formal Shi'i theology. They staunchly supported Ahmadinejad and promote Mahdism, recalling dreams about and sightings of the Mahdi.”²⁹⁰ Furthermore, since Ahmadinejad became president, hundreds of websites and blogs have emerged that support the former president's view of Mahdism.²⁹¹ All that being said, Ahmadinejad is no longer president, and his successor, Hassan Rouhani, has had little to say about the subject. What, then, do the works of Supreme Leader Khamenei say about the doctrine of Mahdism, and what does the sacred carrier concept of the Hidden Imam mean in terms of a future conflict with the United States or Israel?

According to the constitution, Khamenei, as supreme leader, is functioning as the principal deputy to the Hidden Imam. He therefore routinely pays homage in his speeches to his doctrinal superior. He often concludes a speech by saying something to the effect of: “God willing, these efforts will be rewarded by Imam Mahdi (may our souls be sacrificed for his sake),”²⁹² or “I hope that He [God] will make the holy heart of the Imam of the Age (may our souls be sacrificed for his sake) pleased with us.”²⁹³ In perhaps his strongest endorsement of the doctrine of Mahdism, Khamenei delivered a speech in 2008 marking Imam Mahdi's birth anniversary. In this speech, Khamenei expounds on messianic doctrine and discusses what it means to wait for the Mahdi:

Waiting for the arrival of Imam Mahdi does not mean that we should remain idle and not make any efforts to improve...What does waiting for the savior mean? It means waiting for the strong, powerful and divine hand of Imam Mahdi to put an end to the domination of the oppressive

²⁸⁹ Ahdiyyih, “Ahmadinejad and the Mahdi.”

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² Ali Khamenei, “Supreme Leader's Speech to Officials of the Judiciary Branch,” accessed July 5, 2014, http://english.khamenei.ir/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=835&Itemid=4.

²⁹³ Ali Khamenei, “Supreme Leader's Norouz Message 1393,” accessed July 5, 2014, http://english.khamenei.ir/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1888.

powers with the help of humans, to bring justice to the world, to raise the flag of monotheism, and to lead humans to worshipping God. We should get prepared for this. The formation of the Islamic Republic prepared the ground for this great and historic movement. Everything that is done to achieve justice in the world takes us one step forward towards reaching this lofty goal.²⁹⁴

In a more recent event, June 6, 2014, Khamenei met with the director and researchers of Iran's Dar-ul Hadith Research Institute and was presented an encyclopedia of Mahdaviat (about the Mahdi). Khamenei remarked that the encyclopedia is "a good example of identifying the shortcomings in this field of research," and further stated: "The issue of Mahdaviat and the re-appearance of the Imam of the Age (may God hasten his re-appearance) is God's definite promise."²⁹⁵

The religious tools of mass media and social media have also played a significant role in perpetuating the idea of the Mahdi's return. Ahmadinejad's administration purportedly assisted in making a 2011 documentary film titled "The Coming is Near," which depicts "Iran as the epicenter of a globalizing messianic movement that was sweeping across the Middle East and preparing the way for the Mahdi."²⁹⁶ The film likens President Ahmadinejad to Soheib ibn Soheib, "the Hidden Imam's right-hand man who is said to conquer Jerusalem in preparation for the Mahdi's return" and Supreme Leader Khamenei as being similar to Seyyed Khorosani, "who has been prophesied to be victorious in the intense wars that will take place before the [Mahdi's] Coming."²⁹⁷

On the days leading up to the Mahdi's 2014 birth anniversary, mid-June 2014 (the 15 of Sha'ban in the Islamic calendar)—Khamenei's office released a series of tweets about "The Promised Mahdi." For example, a June 12 tweet exclaimed the following using the vernacular of social media: "Characteristic of Promised #Mahdi is that thru

²⁹⁴ Ali Khamenei, "Supreme Leader's Speech on the Occasion of Imam Mahdi's Birth Anniversary," accessed July 5, 2014, http://english.khamenei.ir/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=867&Itemid=4.

²⁹⁵ Ali Khamenei, "Supreme Leader Meets with Director and Researchers of Dar-ul Hadith Research Institute," accessed July 5, 2014, http://english.khamenei.ir/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1922.

²⁹⁶ Kaussler, "Is The End Nigh for the Islamic Republic?," 78.

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 78, 79.

him, God fills earth w/#justice& fairness while b4 him, it'd been filled w/injustice &tyranny.”²⁹⁸ In another tweet on June 13, the Supreme Leader’s office included a colorful infographic affirming that “The entire believing mankind is awaiting a savior (as seen in Figure 8).”²⁹⁹



Figure 8. Khamenei Tweet: “The Promised Mahdi”

²⁹⁸ https://twitter.com/khamenei_ir/status/477021279124717568, June 12, 2014.

²⁹⁹ https://twitter.com/khamenei_ir/status/477525617559478272, June 13, 2014.

It is evident, therefore, that the doctrine of Mahdism, is still being promoted in Iran and to the world, albeit without the same zeal and frequency that Ahmadinejad endorsed. Khamenei, with his validation of Rouhani as Iran's new president in 2013, is likely trying to soften the regime's hardliner (and messianic) reputation. However, with an active messianic movement in Iran, and the proliferation of Internet media supporting Mahdism, Khamenei and his inner circle will find it increasingly difficult to balance the messianic doctrine of the Hidden Imam—upon which Twelver Shi'ism is based—with the need for pragmatism. Mohebat Ahdiyyih calls it a “Pandora's box for the traditional clerics and the Islamic Republic as an increasing number of people learn about the issue [of Mahdism].”³⁰⁰

Perhaps it would be the IRGC, then, that perpetuates or diminishes this sacred carrier belief in the Mahdi's promised reappearance. As the Iranian constitution states, “The Army of the Islamic Republic of Iran must be an Islamic army... committed to Islamic ideology and the people.”³⁰¹ In theory, would not the IRGC and its Basij volunteer force become the Mahdi's army?

In an August 2012 Friday prayer speech in Tehran, Ali Sa'idi, Khamenei's representative to the IRGC, proclaimed: “The main burden of preparing the ground for the advent of the Imam of the Age rests on Khamenei, the Iranian people and the IRGC... The Basij plays a role... The advent of the Imam of the Age requires 100 million self-sacrificing IRGC members and Basijis.”³⁰² Could this be why the regime is limiting birth control with the intent to double the country's population to 150 million? Indeed, there are many reasons why Iran wants to increase its birthrate, many of which were outlined in Chapter IV. One answer is that dictatorships need manpower. They need impressionable youth that can be indoctrinated to the regime's ideology and fill the ranks of the Basij militia. *Jane's* most recent assessment on Iran describes the Basij youth

³⁰⁰ Ahdiyyih, “Ahmadinejad and the Mahdi.”

³⁰¹ Firoozeh Papan-Matin (trans.), “The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (1989 Edition),” 194.

³⁰² “Khamenei's Representative to IRGC Urges Action for Reappearance of the Mahdi,” *Iran Daily Brief*, August 14, 2012, <http://www.irandailybrief.com/2012/08/14/khameneis-representative-to-irgc-urges-action-for-reappearance-of-the-mahdi/>.

movement as similar “to the ‘young pioneers’ and ‘komosol’ of the Soviet Union; essentially a mass youth movement that included mostly children and helped encourage regime support at a young age.”³⁰³

In summary, this purpose of this chapter, and indeed, this thesis is to uncover the religious narratives—and within these narratives, the sacred carriers and religious tools the Iranian regime could use against the United States in a low or high intensity conflict. The above analysis highlights how religion shapes Iran’s actions through past, present, and future aggressive scenarios, giving U.S. policymakers and analysts deeper insights into a theocratic dictatorship that has, more often than not, puzzled Western observers for more than 35 years. Indeed, by understanding Iran’s sacred carriers and religious tools, U.S. policymakers and government analysts will perhaps be able to more effectively deconstruct the religious elements that influence Iran, recognize what the regime may be trying to accomplish, and the tools it will use to achieve its objectives. The final, concluding, chapter goes one step further and recommends a framework for United States and Western analysts to view and understand Iran.

³⁰³ IHS Jane’s, *Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment - Iran*, Article #11 Page 7 of 10.

VII. CONCLUSION

Using a grounded theory approach, this research project explored and surveyed numerous primary source documents from Iran's most influential contemporary leaders. The goal was to answer the research question: *What sacred carriers and religious tools could the Iranian regime use to mobilize or launch attacks against United States interests at home or abroad?* The findings revealed three major narratives that are central to the self-preservation of the Iranian regime: 1) establishing a government representing true or pure Islam; 2) protecting the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Revolution; and 3) fighting oppression and imperialism. Each of these narratives contain religious subthemes and topics, all of which provide some degree of context and meaning to the regime's actions and words. Within the framework of these narratives, the previous chapter examined Iran's most prominent sacred carriers and religious tools—the enabling factors the regime could use to mobilize against or attack the United States. This final chapter discusses the project's conclusions and suggests a conceptual framework for analyzing the Iranian regime. It also offers recommendations for further research.

A. PROJECT CONCLUSIONS

The findings and subsequent analyses from this research project do not suggest that the Iranian religious elite would sacrifice the regime's existence for an “all out” apocalyptic, or purely religious war. For the most part, Iran will act as a pragmatic nation-state as it seeks to improve its economy, exploit its natural resources, and shore up its armed forces to defend the country and protect the regime. Most experts and scholars agree, however, that Iran's decision-making process is extremely complex and, more often than not, unpredictable. Ray Takeyh describes Iran's foreign policy as a “matrix with three competing elements—Islamic ideology, national interests, and factional politics—all constantly at battle. As such, Iran's policy has always been characterized by a degree of inconsistency and wild oscillation between pragmatism and dogma.”³⁰⁴

³⁰⁴ Ray Takeyh, *Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic* (New York: Times Books, 2006), 4.

The findings and analyses do indicate, however, that Iran would utilize the power of its sacred carriers and religious tools to complement an asymmetric war against the United States or to mobilize forces for a larger campaign or war, if needed. Indeed, the evidence examined in the previous chapter supports the concept that Iran is using, and will continue to use religious tools as part of a low profile, asymmetric war against the United States and Israel.

Furthermore, the findings show the regime's prolific use of social media—a tool the Supreme Leader uses, in part, to propagate religious ideology to a regional and worldwide audience. Khamenei's Twitter feed, for example, has been actively denigrating Israel, and promoting the cause of the Palestinians during Israel's 2014 conflict with Hamas in Gaza. In Will Fulton's 2013 article titled, "IRGC Messaging: Insight into a Revolutionary Regime," he explains that "Iran perceives itself to be actively engaged in conflict with Israel and the West, and Iran's response to this perception has been, in part, to mount an aggressive messaging campaign aimed at deterring its enemies, assuring a domestic audience, and supporting its claims of regional dominance."³⁰⁵ Fulton astutely recognizes that "Rhetoric, of course, does not equal intent, nor does it reflect reality."³⁰⁶

Understanding Iran's true intent and whether or not it reflects reality is a difficult, if not impossible task. There are no clear 'cause and effect' markers that can predict, with a high degree of accuracy, Iran's next moves that are of consequence to the United States. However, as this thesis demonstrates and suggests, the religious tools and sacred carriers could be thought of as markers (or signs) within the context of Iran's larger religious narratives. In essence, the markers and narratives can help provide the context behind the rhetoric, and give meaning to action. Moghaddam describes Islamic societies as "'living history' societies, in that they tend to look to narratives about the past than the future for inspiration and guidance."³⁰⁷ The religious aspect of Iran—as it relates to aggression

³⁰⁵ Will Fulton, "IRGC Messaging: Insight into a Revolutionary Regime," May 20, 2013, <http://www.irantracker.org/analysis/fulton-irgc-messaging-insight-revolutionary-regime-may-20-2013>.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ Moghaddam, *From the Terrorists' Point of View: What They Experience and Why They Come to Destroy*, Kindle Locations 757–758.

against the United States—therefore, needs to be understood through a framework that examines patterns of narratives “about the past” and religious markers in order to make sense of a complex environment. The following section suggests such a framework—one that will, perhaps, provide an alternate way to understand how Iran’s Islamic ideology influences its decision-making process.

B. USING THE CYNEFIN FRAMEWORK TO UNDERSTAND IRAN

David J. Snowden and Mary E. Boone developed the Cynefin framework (pronounced ku-*nev*-in³⁰⁸) in the late 1990s to help executives “see things from new viewpoints, assimilate complex concepts, and address real-world problems and opportunities.”³⁰⁹ Based on complexity science, the Cynefin framework helps users make sense of chaotic, complex, and ordered systems—with the ordered system further divided into simple and complicated (see Figure 9). In ordered systems “the relationship between cause and effect exists, it is predictable, [and] it can be determined in advance.”³¹⁰ In the complex and chaotic unordered systems, there is no causality, hence the need to allow patterns to emerge whereby one can make sense of the data and then respond accordingly.³¹¹ Similar to this thesis, the complex and chaotic systems are exploratory—a “sense-making model,” where data precedes the framework.³¹² Of the five systems explained by Snowden and Boone in the Cynefin framework, the complex domain best describes the Islamic Republic of Iran.

As mentioned in Chapter IV, the Rand Corporation concluded in its 2010 research project that “one of the attributes of Iranian elite dynamics is the fact that the rules of the game are constantly in flux and are nowhere codified.”³¹³ Hence, identifying cause and

³⁰⁸ According to David Snowden and Mary Boone, “*Cynefin* is a Welsh word that signifies the multiple factors in our environment and our experience that influence us in ways we can never understand.” This definition is found in page 2 of the source document is listed in footnote 6.

³⁰⁹ Snowden and Boone, “A Leader’s Framework for Decision Making,” 1–2.

³¹⁰ *The Cynefin Framework*, 2010, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N7oz366X0-8&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

³¹¹ Snowden and Boone, “A Leader’s Framework for Decision Making,” 4.

³¹² *The Cynefin Framework*.

³¹³ Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, Preface.

effect relationships and predicting Iran’s future moves are especially difficult, if not impossible most of the time. In the Cynefin framework’s complex domain, the analyst or leader “can understand why things happen only in retrospect,” and “must patiently allow the path forward to reveal itself. They need to probe first, then sense, and then respond.”³¹⁴ Therefore, by examining religious patterns, narratives and markers (if the scenario fits) within the complex system, and then applying the framework’s corresponding decision-making strategy, U.S. policymakers and analysts might more accurately make sense of Iran’s complex scenarios—and make better decisions vis-à-vis Iran. Tables 2 and 3, adapted from Snowden and Boone’s *Harvard Business Review* article, describe the characteristics of a complex system, as well as its corresponding decision-making strategy.

Understanding Complexity in the Cynefin Framework
• It involves large numbers of interacting elements.
• The interactions are nonlinear, and minor changes can produce disproportionately major consequences.
• The system is dynamic, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and solutions can’t be imposed; rather, they arise from the circumstances. This is frequently referred to as <i>emergence</i> .
• The system has a history, and the past is integrated with the present; the elements evolve with one another and with the environment; and evolution is irreversible.
• Though a complex system may, in retrospect, appear to be ordered and predictable, hindsight does not lead to foresight because the external conditions and systems constantly change.
• Unlike in ordered systems (where the system constrains the agents), or chaotic systems (where there are no constraints), in a complex system the agents and the system constrain one another, especially over time. This means that we cannot forecast or predict what will happen.

Table 2. Understanding Complexity in the Cynefin Framework³¹⁵

³¹⁴ Snowden and Boone, “A Leader’s Framework for Decision Making,” 5.

³¹⁵ Ibid., 3.

The Complexity Decision-Making Strategy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Probe, sense, respond
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create environments and experiments that allow patterns to emerge
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase levels of interaction and communication
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use methods that can help generate ideas: Open up discussion (as through large group methods); set barriers; stimulate attractors; encourage dissent and diversity; and manage starting conditions and monitor for emergence

Table 3. The Complexity Decision-Making Strategy³¹⁶

The complexity decision-making model will not always apply to Iran—it is not a one-size-fits-all application. In some scenarios there will be order and predictability, and at other times chaos or disorder might prevail. The key objective, therefore, is to identify the correct system in which to make decisions. While there is much more to the Cynefin framework than has been described in these few paragraphs, the important takeaway is that the model is flexible—it allows one to “think differently and act differently” depending on the identified system or domain.³¹⁷ An excellent source to understand the Cynefin framework at the basic level is Snowden and Boone’s article, “A Leader’s Framework for Decision Making,” in the November 2007 *Harvard Business Review*. Another resource is David Snowden’s Cognitive Edge Network YouTube channel that offers several Cynefin-related instructional videos dealing with complexity and narrative.³¹⁸

³¹⁶ Ibid., 7.

³¹⁷ *The Cynefin Framework*.

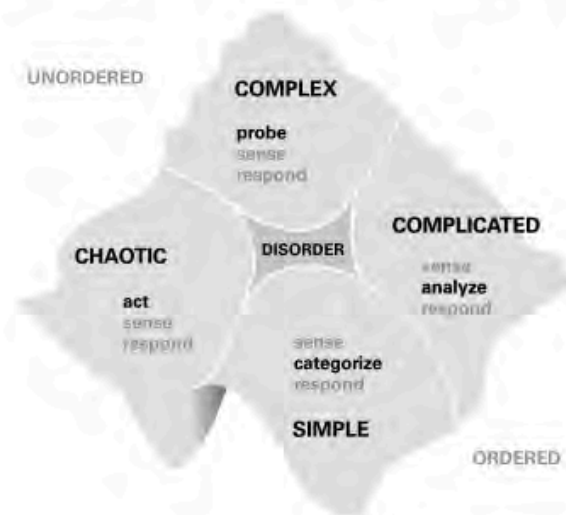
³¹⁸ “Cognitive Edge - YouTube,” accessed August 1, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/user/CognitiveEdge/about>.

The Cynefin Framework

The Cynefin framework helps leaders determine the prevailing operative context so that they can make appropriate choices. Each domain requires different actions. *Simple* and *complicated* contexts assume an ordered universe, where cause-and-effect relationships are perceptible, and right answers can be determined based on the facts. *Complex* and *chaotic* contexts are unordered—there is no immediately apparent relationship between cause and effect, and the way forward is determined based on emerging patterns. The ordered world is the

world of fact-based management; the unordered world represents pattern-based management.

The very nature of the fifth context—*disorder*—makes it particularly difficult to recognize when one is in it. Here, multiple perspectives jostle for prominence, factional leaders argue with one another, and cacophony rules. The way out of this realm is to break down the situation into constituent parts and assign each to one of the other four realms. Leaders can then make decisions and intervene in contextually appropriate ways.



Based on a graphic by Debra Johnson

Figure 9. The Cynefin Framework.³¹⁹

In a very insightful January 2014 article titled, “The Middle East as an Intelligence Challenge,” Ephraim Kam, a former Israeli Defense Force colonel, discusses the reasons why Western analysts often fail to predict strategic surprises in their Middle East intelligence assessments. In general, Kam attributes the failure to the West’s lack of “sufficient comprehension of the political and social function of religious, ethnic, and

³¹⁹ Snowden and Boone, “A Leader’s Framework for Decision Making,” 4.

tribal affiliations, which affect the political order and sometimes undermine it.”³²⁰ Kam argues: “it is impossible to assess the policy of Islamic groups—including the Iranian leadership and organizations like Hizbollah and Hamas—in terms of Western realpolitik and rationalism alone.”³²¹ Furthermore, with regard to Iran’s religious factor, Kam’s insight reflects many of the same characteristics that are found in the Cynefin’s complexity model. In particular, Kam reinforces the Cynefin complexity notion that Iran’s system is especially dynamic—that “it involves large numbers of interacting elements, the interactions are nonlinear, [and] the whole is greater than the sum of its parts” (see Understanding Complexity table above).³²² The following quote from Kam’s article, for example, underscores the above Cynefin complexity principles:

The main difficulty in understanding Iran is the nature of the regime. Iran’s Supreme Leader, who is also its chief decision maker, is a cleric, and his way of thinking is not adequately understood...it is unclear what weight the various parties participating in the process have...It is especially unclear what weight the religious-ideological commandments have in the decision making process, and to what degree the Iranian leadership uses considerations regarded as rational according to Western criteria. It is true that decision making processes in other countries in the region are also insufficiently understood, but the case of Iran is much more significant, due to the leading role played by its religious leaders and the fundamentalist motivation in the process, and also due to Iran’s importance in the region.³²³

Ephraim Kam, who is currently a senior a research fellow at Israel’s Institute for National Security Studies, concludes his article by offering an emergent theory to deal with faulty Middle East strategic assessments. “In the end,” he writes, “it may be that the most practical way of coping with mistaken assessments is to take the possibility of strategic surprise into account, and prepare for it in advance.”³²⁴ While this may seem like a fatalistic approach, especially for Israel, preparedness may perhaps be the smartest

³²⁰ Ephraim Kam, *The Middle East as an Intelligence Challenge*, Strategic Assessment (The Institute for National Security Studies, January 2014), 94, <http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=6625>.

³²¹ Ibid., 98.

³²² Snowden and Boone, “A Leader’s Framework for Decision Making,” 3.

³²³ Kam, *The Middle East as an Intelligence Challenge*, 99–100.

³²⁴ Ibid., 101.

approach. In the Cynefin framework, complex contexts represent the “domain of emergence,” where “at least one right answer exists...however, right answers can’t be ferreted out.”³²⁵ For the United States and Israel, therefore, dealing with Iran through the Cynefin complex system calls for leaders and analysts to work collaboratively in an effort to “probe, sense, and respond” and continually “monitor for emergence.”³²⁶

C. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Since the September 11, 2001 attacks, the U.S. homeland security enterprise has focused primarily on the threat from al-Qaeda, its affiliates, and potential follow on plots from overseas Sunni extremists. More recently, the United States is grappling with threats of less-sophisticated attacks by al-Qaeda-inspired homegrown violent extremists. These are all significant threats from Sunni extremists that need to be understood and disrupted. On the other hand, the potential homeland threat from Shia extremists is not well understood by the majority of U.S. homeland security practitioners. Since Iran is a state sponsor of terrorism—specifically through the IRGC Qods Force and Hezbollah—more must be done to understand Iran through research, context, and dialogue. Vali Nasr, author of *The Shia Revival*, believes that “when the dust settles, the center of gravity will no longer lie with the Arab-Sunni countries, but will be held by Shia ones...The United States does not know the Shia well. That will have to change, if for no better reason than that the Shia live on top of some the richest oil fields in the region.”³²⁷ While Nasr exaggerates his case (out of approximately 1.4 billion Muslims in the world, about 1.25 billion are Sunni), the point is the United States needs to understand the Shia and, in particular, potential threats emanating from Shia extremists.³²⁸

This thesis contributes, in a relatively small, but unique way, to knowing the Shia and to understanding Iran in the context of its religion. It offers an exploratory look at some of Iran’s narratives, sacred carriers, and religious tools as potential strategic

³²⁵ Snowden and Boone, “A Leader’s Framework for Decision Making,” 5.

³²⁶ Ibid., 7.

³²⁷ Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future*, Kindle Locations 3287–3290.

³²⁸ Moghaddam, Online Discussion, August 8, 2014.

justifications for aggression against the United States. While the scope of this study was narrowed in order to frame and answer one research question, there are many other questions and avenues of related research that should be explored. The following ideas and questions are offered as possible next steps in furtherance of this topic.

1. Additional Research Questions and Gaps

When considering Iran as a Shia Islamic state, there are many questions that require further exploration through sound research and analysis. Below are a few examples of potential research questions—mostly focusing on Shia end-times beliefs—that emerged during this study, and were only partly answered, or fell outside the scope of this thesis.

- Looking at the different factions within Twelver Shi'ism, which factions and which ayatollahs are the most millenarian in their beliefs? Which ones have the most followers? Which ones command the most respect and support by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)?
- What are the IRGC leaders' end-times beliefs?
- Which hardline anti-U.S. Iranian leaders could feasibly come to power with strong millenarian beliefs? Would they act on these beliefs if threatened by the U.S. and/or Israel?
- Who of all the hardline, conservative leaders in Iran would promote the Islamic Republic to hasten the return of the Mahdi? How would they do it?
- What are the most prevalent and accepted apocalyptic Shia teachings coming out of the Shia religious centers of Qom, Iran and Najaf, Iraq?
- Is there a process whereby Iran could radicalize toward an aggressive millenarian-based state based on actions and/or threats from the U.S. or Israel?
- Assuming that for the Iranian Shia it is a matter of when, not if, the Mahdi will return, what are there trigger points or signs that might prompt Iran to take extreme action to hasten the Mahdi's return?

While the Internet offers a wealth of primary source materials in the English language—from Iran's Supreme Leader to many of the leading ayatollahs within Shia Islam—there is also an abundance of information in Farsi and Arabic. While there was an exhaustive effort in this study to find as many relevant English-translated sources as possible, one of the primary gaps of this research was the unknown body of literature in

other languages—especially in Farsi. Moreover, as mentioned in the literature review, there are a few very good expository writings about Shia end-times beliefs (Sachedina and Amanat to name a few); however, with the Middle East transforming almost daily in Iraq and Syria, more contemporary works are needed that address Twelver Shia narratives and/or apocalyptic beliefs as they relate to Iran and the region.

2. Possible Next Steps

In line with some of the research questions, there are several ways to further explore the findings from this thesis. Some of these ideas could be developed as smaller works or natural extensions of this project. A few ideas, however, could be broad enough to stand alone as another thesis, dissertation or scholarly book. They are in no particular order.

- A study of Shia Islamic ‘signs of the times’ specifically looking for the events that will precede the advent of the Mahdi. Have some of these events happened, and if so, how do the Iranian regime and the influential Shia ayatollahs interpret these events?
- An examination of the Shia doctrine of *taqqiya* or ‘dissimulation’ as a religious tool. While *taqqiya* was not addressed in this thesis, Momen describes it as lawful “religious dissimulation [concealment] while maintaining mental reservation...[to be used] in situations where there is overwhelming danger of loss of life or property and where no danger to religion would occur thereby.”³²⁹ Does the current regime use and/or abuse the doctrine of *taqqiya* to justify deceiving or concealing information from the West? Could *taqqiya* play a role in the current nuclear negotiations between the West and Iran?
- An exploration of Shia Islamic doctrine with regard to weapons of mass destruction (WMD)—in particular nuclear weapons. While this was only briefly discussed in chapter four, a further analysis of the topic could outline everything Iran’s two Supreme Leaders have said regarding the subject—its permissiveness, or lack thereof—as well as what other influential ayatollahs believe about the issue.
- A social media analysis of Iran. While ordinary citizens of Iran are currently banned from using Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other social media outlets, Iran’s leaders use it extensively. Many Iranian citizens are, however, circumventing Iran’s Internet filter ban and finding ways to communicate via mainstream social media. A comprehensive “big data”

³²⁹ Momen, *An Introduction to Shi‘i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi‘ism*, 183.

analysis of social media in Iran could reveal much about what the leadership says, and whether or not the citizens accept or reject the regimes political and religious edict.

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